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Country Woman

THE COUNTRY LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

Rural Inspiration

Women living the life

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to make & fill

**Jan
Brett**

Children's
author &
champion of
chickens



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Cluck of the draw

When Jan Brett needs inspiration for one of her children's books, she looks no further than her own backyard.

"Chickens are so funny, expressive and beautiful creatures—they're natural models," says the best-selling author, illustrator and self-proclaimed poultry fanatic. Jan shares a 2-acre home in Norwell, Massachusetts, with her husband, Joe Hearne, and some 60 ornamental chickens she breeds, sells and shows. A few have even come to roost as characters in her whimsical, animal-rich stories. (Her books include modern children's classics like *The Hat*, *The Mitten* and *Gingerbread Baby*.)

"My childhood home had a barn in back that my sisters and I proceeded to fill," Jan says of their menagerie, which boasted a burro, horse, guinea pigs and, of course, chickens. "We used to bike to a nearby farm and buy baby chicks for 35 cents apiece. A smart little hen named Dolly even learned to ride on our handlebars."

Still charmed by chickens, Jan raises several breeds—Silkies, buff Brahmas, Cochins, Silver Phoenix and Polish included. Every June, when she and Joe travel to their home in the Berkshires (Joe, a musician with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, performs there every summer), they pack up flock, stock and bantams.

"For years, we carried the chickens in our cars," Jan says, recalling squawky squabbles erupting in her hatchback. "Now we transport them in cages inside a horse trailer, and they seem to enjoy the trip."

Artist Jan Brett talks about her feathered friends and the children's stories they've inspired.

STORY BY SHARON SELZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM WIELAND
STYLING BY PAM STASNEY



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BEAUTIFUL BORDERS are one of Jan's artistic trademarks, depicting what has happened in her story and foreshadowing what's to come. Tiny watercolor brushes render exquisite detail in her illustrations.



High-Class Coops

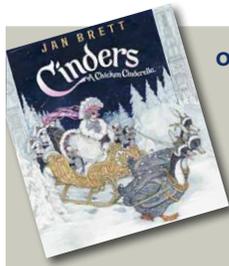
It's no wonder her chickens look forward to summer vacation, considering the ritzy roosts that await them—one for hens, one for roosters. "The boys' house is soundproof, in consideration for our neighbors," Jan says. "We have classical music playing on the radio in both houses. I think the chickens find it as soothing as we do."

The walls of the pristine wooden structures are brightened by chicken artwork Jan collects and by photos of beaming youngsters holding a pullet in one hand and a blue ribbon in the other. "I sell many of my chicks to 4-H members for their animal projects," she says. A mentor to junior exhibitors, Jan's happy to give pointers on what makes a winning chicken. "I try to be an example of what goes into good husbandry," she says. Jan counts her chicken chores as a highlight of her day. "I actually love cleaning pens," she says, adding that she's rewarded daily with nest-fresh eggs for her homemade bread.

When preparing for poultry shows, "I get intense," she admits. As a matter of fact, she becomes a regular chicken beautician.

Forget everything you've heard about cranky wet hens. "My chickens love warm water!" Jan says. "I wash their crests with baby shampoo in the sink. Then I transfer them to the bathtub to wash their bodies." Next, she clips and files their nails and applies glycerin moisturizer to their beaks, combs and wattles. She dries them under a heat lamp.

More than a few times, Jan's fancy fowl have strutted off with best bantam honors and even a super grand championship. Win or lose, she names each chicken based on the theme of the book she's working on at the time.



Once Upon a Chicken

Beloved children's author and illustrator Jan Brett has more than 38 million books in print, the latest about an enchanting chicken.

"My editor and I both keep chickens, and we were discussing the personalities in a flock," she recalls. "There are always the bossy girls telling the shy, quiet ones what to do—just like Cinderella!"

That insight inspired *Cinders: A Chicken Cinderella*, modeled after Jan's own pretty Silver Phoenix hen. The book will be available at bookstores in November.

A RURAL RETREAT in the Berkshires gives Jan a window on nature, her constant inspiration. She works eight hours every day and often paints late into the evening.



The World in Watercolor

Jan's pampered poultry get a chicken sitter when she and Joe travel to do research on books she sets in locales like Africa, China, Scandinavia and the Arctic. Typically, she comes home with suitcases full of information on the flora, fauna and folk customs of the country, which she weaves into her elaborate watercolor illustrations.

"It's an inch an hour," Jan says of the painstaking detail she pours into her scenes, each framed with an intricate border that often hints to perceptive young readers where the story is going. "I want kids to be able to open my books and feel as if they could walk right into the pages."

Jan is more than just a name on a page to her young followers. She schedules a book tour

every fall to meet her fans in person. She and Joe hit the road in a bus wrapped with artwork from her latest book. "Traveling this way gives us the flexibility to visit smaller out-of-the-way towns," she explains. "Plus I have enough room to bring along my easel."

Besides signing books, Jan gives a mini art lesson at most every appearance. "Sometimes, the kids bring their own artwork to show me—their creativity blows me away," she says. "We adults need to encourage them to keep using their imaginations."

Jan's stories have been incorporated into preschool and elementary schools' curricula across the country. Her website, *Janbrett.com*, features thousands of free educational activities for teachers to download and use

with their students.

As the grandmother of six tech-savvy youngsters, Jan knows how to engage her online audience.

"For the past couple of years, we've held a contest on Facebook, encouraging parents, teachers and librarians to enter to win a school or library visit from me," she says. Tens of thousands of entries are common.

"I have a great time spending a day with the kids—drawing with them, sitting in on their art club meetings and speaking at their school assemblies," she says. "At the end of my talk, I ask who wants to be a writer or illustrator, and 90 percent of the hands go up."

"That makes me happy—and hopeful about the future." ☺



Raise a Reader

About half of parents (49 percent) think their children don't spend enough time reading books for fun, according to a recent *Kids & Family Reading Report* by Scholastic, the children's publishing, education and media company.

Scholastic Vice President Maggie McGuire offers these musts to keep kids reading:

Be a reading role model!—let your children see you reading daily.

Fill your home with books and reading materials—magazines, newspapers, comic books—that tap into your children's interests.

Read aloud to your children, even after they can read by themselves. You'll build their vocabularies, show them books are fun and inspire a lifetime love of reading.

Build reading into your children's daily schedule, and the habit will grow.

Let your children read print, digital or both, as long as they read every day.

POULTRY PALACES house Jan's elegant white-crested Polish bantam Warner and other fancy fowl she breeds and shows at chicken competitions.

Home & Garden

CURRENTS | Q&A

Even Turtles Need a Nice Place to Call Home



Erik Jacobs for The New York Times

The children's-book author Jan Brett in the turtle pond that she and her husband installed.

By JULIE LASKY

Published: August 15, 2012

Two years ago, the children's-book author and illustrator Jan Brett and her husband, Joseph Hearne, a bassist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, installed a turtle pond on the grounds of their two-acre home in Norwell, Mass. It was inspired by her plan to write a book about an Eastern box turtle with wildflowers and ferns sprouting from its shell. In "Mossy," due out next month (G. P. Putnam's Sons; \$17.99), the turtle spends some unhappy months on display at a natural-history museum until a penitent biologist restores it to its habitat.

Ms. Brett, 62, waited and waited for a turtle to move into her pond. Now, mere weeks before the book's publication, one is said to be living there. A suspicious reporter had questions, which Ms. Brett answered good-naturedly by phone.

You've done books about hedgehogs. You've done books about chickens. You've even done books about gingerbread babies. How did you get started on turtles?

We were at our summer place dangling our heels into the lake at the end of our dock, when I looked down and saw what looked like waterweeds in the shape of a turtle. It rose out of the water. It was a snapper turtle growing all these waterweeds on its back. So I got the idea: what about a book about a turtle that grows a garden on its back? But then I thought it needed a terrestrial turtle. The turtle in my pond is an Eastern painted turtle, which is aquatic.

Before we talk about your turtle, can we discuss the pond?

We had it made specifically for turtles and for the book. We made it quite deep, so they could hibernate there, below the frost line. We had basking rocks made that are a little above the pond surface.

Basking rocks?

Even though aquatic turtles live in water, they need to haul out — that's the expression used — and dry their shells.

Then what happened?

We knew we were on the right track when we got a giant bullfrog. That was last year. This year, we have tadpoles.

So when did this alleged turtle show up?

In June. We have wetlands beyond the house. I was afraid turtles wouldn't come because they were enamored of those ponds. Finally, one moved in. I think the sound of the bullfrogs did it. In the Northeast, so many ponds form in the spring, but then they dry up in the summer. When the pond dries up, tadpoles aren't able to survive.

Are you saying that turtles are reassured by the sound of bullfrogs because they know they'll find a pond deep enough to remain in year-round?

That's my theory. A herpetologist following an Eastern box turtle noticed that, in very dry weather, it would tap its foot on the ground, and then earthworms, which are its food, would rise to the surface thinking it was raindrops. When I read that, I was incredulous, but if you're a turtle or any kind of animal on the ground, it's your survival. Nature is complex.

You're sure you didn't just pick up a turtle at a pet store?

I thought about it. But, no, there was no pet-shop intervention. You don't know what kind of disease might appear. I also thought of buying one from the Internet, but if you take a turtle and put it in a pond, it will crawl off and go where it wants to go.

Is it possible that an Eastern box turtle like Mossy will find its way to the pond?

I had been hoping, and it still might happen. Eastern box turtles are constantly on the move in ponds and rivers, where their food source is. They browse. So I planted strawberries and lingonberries and different flowers around the pond to attract them. There's lobelia, joe-pye weeds, cattails, waterlilies, tons of ferns. I even planted squash.

You've owned some of the animals that served as models for the characters in your books. Hedgehogs and chickens spring to mind. And now you have a turtle. Have you considered more traditional pets for inspiration?

I've done a lot of bear books, and that's because it's easy to put the features of a human being on a bear: bears can stand up, and they have eyes in the front of their head. It's the reason I don't do many reptiles in my books. I'm doing a chicken Cinderella at the moment. Chickens have very expressive body language.

Would you recommend other people install turtle ponds?

I would. And my biggest recommendation is to have two big rocks where you can invite someone over and sit. We have breakfast at the pond every morning, with fresh eggs from the chickens. I cook them up, and I make my own bread. The turtle doesn't usually come out at that time. She comes up at about 9. I say "she," but I don't know if it's a boy or a girl.

What do you look at from your perch?

So many different kinds of dragonflies and damselflies. I've identified three different kinds, but don't ask me what they are. The cardinal flowers are my favorite because hummingbirds come to them. We have black-eyed daisies and, in fall, New England asters, which reseed themselves. The pond turns purple around the edges. There are tons of birds, and they bring some of the seeds, I assume. Maybe a bird book will come of it.



A version of this article appeared in print on August 16, 2012, on page D2 of the New York edition with the headline: Even Turtles Need a Nice Place to

BROWSE TOPICS ▾

Chicken Breeds and Silhouette Easter Eggs



Jan Brett shows some beautiful breeds of chickens and decorates Easter eggs with elegant silhouettes.

Wednesday, November 6, 2013

Children's Author And Illustrator Combs Chickens For Inspiration



For over 30 years, **Jan Brett** has published best selling, beautifully illustrated children's books. For the last decade and half or so, she's raised ornamental chickens.

For her latest book, "[Cinders: A Chicken Cinderella](#)," Jan draws on both loves, with a version of the Grimm tale set in a chicken house in 18th century Russia.

As Brett tells [Here & Now's](#) Robin Young, she finds much inspiration in watching chickens.

"They really are like a troop of actors ... and they're always moving and making little expressions," Brett said. "I said to my husband, I've learned everything I need to know about men just watching my roosters."

Brett also did detailed historical research in Russia for the setting of "Cinders," exploring and incorporating the architecture and the fashions into her book.

ROBIN YOUNG, HOST: It's HERE AND NOW. Jan Brett combines several passions in her best-selling children's books. Of course, there's her love of art, her exquisite detailed artwork, her love of travel to do research, and her chickens. Jan and her husband, Joe, a bassist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, share their two-acre Norwell, Mass., home with dozens of prize-winning ornamental birds. They've starred her books and perhaps...

(SOUNDBITE OF ROOSTER CROWING)

YOUNG: And there's one now.

(more...)

TIME FOR KIDS

Learning
About
Animals

Picture This!

Jan Brett has written and illustrated more than 30 books. It takes hard work to make each one. See how she does it.

THEME: AUTHOR STUDY

timeforkids.com

I'm a Runner

Jan Brett

Children's Book
Author/Illustrator
60, Norwell,
Massachusetts

Interview by
KARA RICHARDSON
WHITELY

Photograph by
ERIC MCNATT

The 2004 Boston Marathon was my first race. [She finished in 4:58.] Before that, I would do three to five miles on my own.

I ran Boston for the MS Society the following year and every year since. [In 2009, her team raised \$350,000 and she set a PR of 4:11:26.] I usually train with my sister Sophie, who has run Boston 27 times. She's fast but she never waits for me. She'll just turn and give me a look and I speed up.

The first mile of every run I always get this feeling that I'm not a runner and that this is all a joke. I don't know why.

When I was a kid, I used to pretend I was a Native American messenger. I was so intrigued by someone running all day just to deliver a message to someone else.

I love when I have a great mantra and I'm really pushing myself. The mantra doesn't have to be fancy, just a made-up song or something I repeat to get through the pain.

Every time I get a new pair of tights, I think they're going to make me run faster.



“ Ideas usually come after I've run 10 miles. I like to ask myself a question and let my unconscious answer it. ”

My goal next year is to do the Laugavegur Ultra Marathon in Iceland to celebrate my 61st birthday.

The first time we went to Africa, it was so beautiful, I was just itching to run. I asked the guide if I could go out in front of the truck. He said if I did that, every predator would come after me. The animals wouldn't even think twice.

A dog bit me once when I was running and I had such an adrenaline rush that I raced home as if I had wings. You always have more. When I run Boston, I always think of that.

On the morning of my first marathon, I grabbed my leather gardening shoes from the dark hotel closet. I lost a few toenails that day. Now I pack my bag the night before.

I always have to bring my GUs. Last year I had five. Does that sound like a lot?

This year I want to finish Boston with nothing left, unable to take another step. That's my goal. 

For the full interview and more photos, see runnersworld.com/imarunner.

BRETT'S 37 BOOKS INCLUDE CLASSICS SUCH AS *THE MITTEN* AND *THE HAT*. HER LATEST, *THE 3 LITTLE DASSIES*, IS DUE IN THE FALL.

One on One | By Keith Bellows

The Treasure Hunter

Author Jan Brett travels the world searching for authentic details to color her books.

JAN BRETT, an acclaimed author and illustrator of children's picture books, has integrated travel—of the most fanciful sort—into her work. Whether scoping out wildlife in Botswana for a book on Noah's Ark or studying troll mythology in northern Sweden, Brett travels in order to imbue her tales with the treasure of authenticity—both factually and visually. The result has been a string of popular titles such as *The Hat*; *Town Mouse*, *Country Mouse*; *Annie and the Wild Animals*; *The Three Snow Bears*; and *Armadillo Rodeo*. Her latest book, *The 3 Little Dassies*, took her to the African nation of Namibia, where she studied the rabbitlike creatures of the story's title and also the patterns and designs of tribal fabrics, which appear in the book's illustrations.

What on Earth are dassies? They're hyraxes, very odd mammals—subungulates—about the size of marmots or woodchucks. They make a high-pitched sound like a woman's scream. Guests at African lodges sometimes hear them at night and think they're leopards. No one has the heart to tell them it was just a hyrax. The animals have these little leathery feet. You see them up in rock cliffs and you can tell where their little caves are because their droppings stain the rocks white.

What are your impressions of Namibia? It's so out of the way. You feel safe walking around the capital, Windhoek. There's a town square where you can see the native Himba people. Some of the women are topless, covered with ocher, and selling beautiful little dolls to tourists.

How do you connect kids' books to travel? It's a matter of following the story. The first book I illustrated was *Fritz and the Beautiful Horses*. That involved going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The next book was set in Ireland. I looked at picture books in the library and thought, "It can't really be like this." I was a single parent at that time. I borrowed a thousand dollars and took my daughter and my mom to Ireland around St. Patrick's Day, because that's when the story takes place. I was amazed to find Ireland really was like that. We went to Dingle on the west coast. The area was unspoiled and had few tourists because tour buses couldn't get out there at the time, about 30 years ago. It was so

BIO

CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

Jan Brett's illustrated stories about the animals, people, and places of the world have made her a commercial and critical success in children's publishing. She boasts of some 36 million books in print and a long list of awards, including a lifetime achievement award from the Boston Public Library.

beautiful and green; lambs were being born; there was a rainbow every two minutes. The only thing bad was the food, except for breakfast, so we all liked to eat a huge breakfast. One of the stranger places I've gone is Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, on Baffin Island. I thought, oh, wow, I could really live here. I went there to research *The Three Snow Bears*. We went in April instead of February, when it would've been 70 below. But it was like going back in time. Everyone is very self-sufficient there.

Do you have a philosophy of travel? For me travel is like a treasure hunt. I go with a list of things to find. For *The 3 Little Dassies* I needed to find the animals' habitat and to find the tribal people so I could examine their traditional clothes. One time I did a book about reindeer, and I had to go find out what the bottom of their hooves look like

because I wanted to show that in an illustration. Another time it was tree bark; another time, badgers—whatever the story requires. It's always a treasure hunt.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



Home base: Brett's Massachusetts office brims with objects and images gathered worldwide.

CHRIS SAURETZ