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by Vivien Santana Hughes

Jan Brett: Marathon Author

When my now 23-year-old son Tyler was 5, we enjoyed reading a new book: *Trouble with Trolls* (Putnam, 1992) by Jan Brett. When he and younger brother, Kyle, moved on to *Goosebumps* and *The Time Warp Trio*, we gave away many picture books, but Brett's richly illustrated story of a girl on Mount Baldy outsmarting a family of mischievous, pointy-headed trolls, stayed with the other children's "classics" on our bookshelf, awaiting a young visitor.

Little did we know at the time, that young visitor would be our now 5-year-old daughter, Nikki, who indeed enjoys the troll tale along with Brett's adventurous *Gingerbread Baby* (Putnam, 1999), a gift just last year.

And recently, my *L.A. Parent* inbox was filled with yet another new book with a familiar, richly detailed style: *The 3 Little Dassies* (Putnam, 2010). Yes, Brett is still at it! With 35 million books in print and more than 30 titles (she keeps up by running marathons), the *New York Times* best-selling author and artist is offering up a new twist on a classic story – *The Three Little Pigs* – in a manner uniquely hers.

We chatted with Brett, who says she knew since kindergarten that she wanted to be an illustrator, just after she arrived home to 17 acres in the Berkshires of Massachusetts after her latest cross-country, 23-city book tour.

"The Three Little Pigs" hit Namibia! How did that idea come about?

A few years ago, my husband and I went on a bird-watching trip to Namibia. These little mammals, dassies, kept popping up – they looked like a cross between a koala and a wood chuck and were the size of pug dogs. These African eagles would fly over to try to get the dassies, and they'd see the eagles' shadows on the rocks and hide. They were the original three little pigs! And the women in Namibia wear beautiful dresses in a retro calico, influenced by German missionaries years ago that had them cover up. The combination of the textiles, the animals, the location: It was almost like a perfect storm of neat things to put in a book!

You're known for your elaborate pictorial borders. How did this idea develop?

I was a high-anxiety kid! I always went to the end of the book first to find out what happened. Later, I'd get so involved with characters, I never minded if I knew the ending. The borders are a 'weaving' of the story instead of an 'architectural' thing, they tell you what happens next. They're a looking glass while you're still in this [current] place.

Did your parents encourage your creativity?

My mom wanted us to develop our own style and use our imaginations. Instead of taking art lessons where we'd be told how to do things, she wanted us to learn on our own. We always had a bunch of paper and crayons, and she let us make a big mess! She was more interested in us being creative and having fun. It really helped me be free. I was very shy, so I drew to express myself.

What are your favorite children's books? Your favorite of your own books?

One that my grandmother gave me but that I, unfortunately, don't still have – a copy of *The Arabian Nights* with swoopy gold letters and rubies and an Arabian horse. And books by Beatrix Potter. Wanda Gag's *Millions of Cats* is timeless. Of my books, it's *The Mitten: A Ukrainian Folktale*.

Find out more about the author and her books at www.janbrett.com. Don't miss the 20th anniversary special edition of *The Wild Christmas Reindeer* (Putnam, 2010). Time for Tyler and Kyle to read this one to Nikki.... ♦

Chat Room columnist Vivien Santana Hughes is a former *L.A. Parent* editor and the mother of three – two sons in college and (surprise!) a 5-year-old daughter. She lives with her family in La Cañada-Flintridge.



Best-selling author and illustrator Jan Brett just wrapped her *The 3 Little Dassies* book tour – which took her from Boston to L.A. with many stops in between, aboard a rock-star-worthy tour bus.

