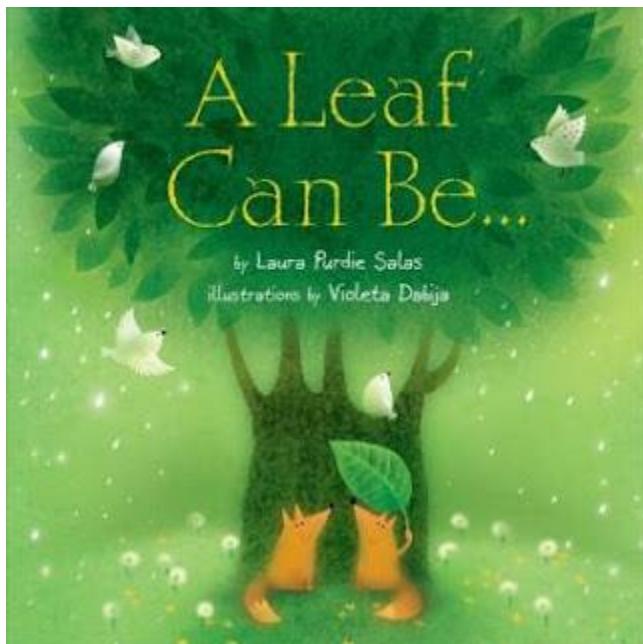


# Cynsations

a source for conversations, publishing information, writer resources & inspiration, bookseller-librarian-teacher appreciation, children's-YA book news & author outreach

**Tuesday, March 27, 2012**

**Celebrating Poetry: Laura Purdie Salas**



By [Kate Hosford](#)  
for [Cynthia Leitich Smith's Cynsations](#)

**Congratulations on the release of your latest rhyming picture book, [A Leaf Can Be...](#), illustrated by [Violeta Dabija](#) (Millbrook, 2012). How did this book come about?**

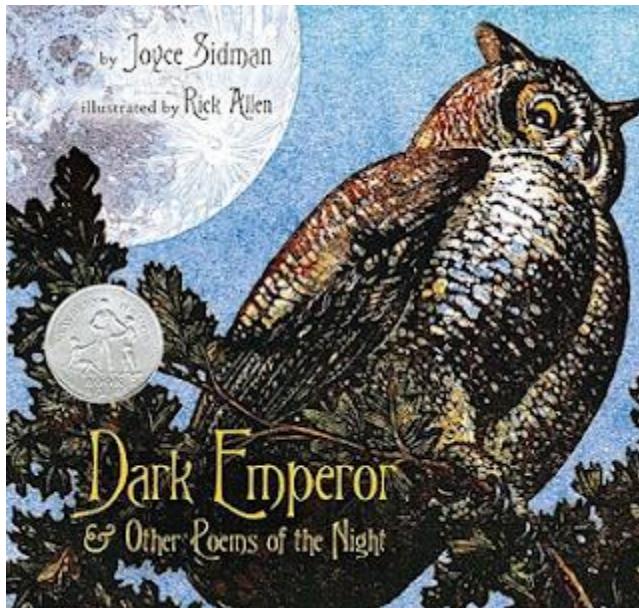
Thanks, Kate! I am so excited about this book.

I already was very happy about it, and once I saw [Violeta Dabija](#)'s artwork for it...wow.

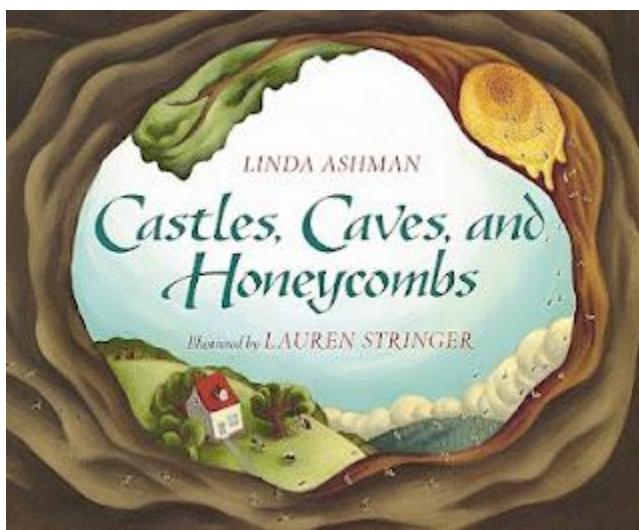
Okay, [A Leaf Can Be...](#) came about partially because I was wanted to diversify. I had two poetry collections in the publishing pipeline, but poetry is such a hard sell. I wanted to write something different next. That way, my agent could continue submitting my poetry collections but also have work in a different form.

I love when poetry and nonfiction collide.

Sometimes, that's in poetry collections. I love Joyce Sidman's [Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night](#), illustrated by [Rick Allen](#) (Houghton Mifflin, 2012), for instance. I have some unpublished manuscripts that use a similar format, including "My Wild and Wacky America: 50 State Poems," where each poem pairs with a brief prose passage giving a little more detail or background for the reader.



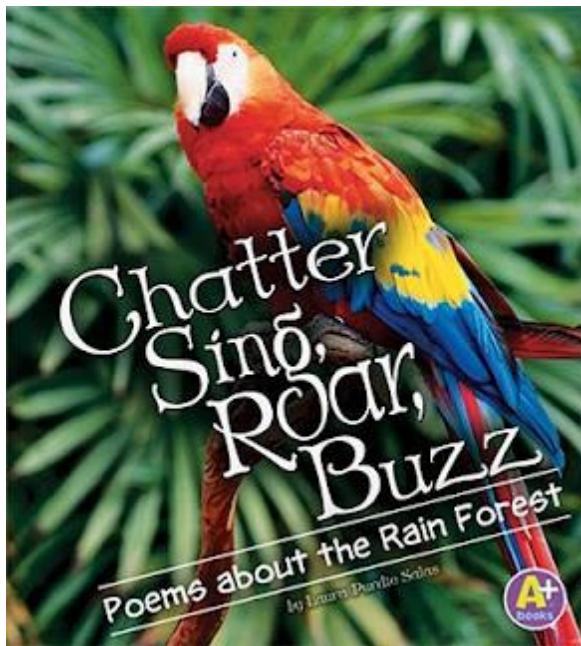
Other times, that collision happens in terrific rhyming nonfiction, like the brilliant [Castles, Caves, and Honeycombs](#) by [Linda Ashman](#), illustrated by Lauren Singer (Harcourt, 2001) and [An Island Grows](#), by [Lola M. Schaefer](#), illustrated by [Cathie Felstead](#) (Greenwillow, 2006)([author interview](#)).



Rhyming nonfiction books rock! And there are not enough of them out there. So I started digging

through my idea stockpile, my incomplete projects, my projects that didn't sell but might be adaptable to this format, etc.

I tried a couple of topics that just didn't work. One was geology-based, and I couldn't make the science simple enough nor find the right rhymes to make the manuscript dance. Then I looked through one of my poetry collections, [Chatter, Sing, Roar, Buzz: Poems About the Rain Forest](#) (Capstone, 2008).



I came across the poem I wrote about Honduran tent bats, these tiny cotton balls of bats that huddle along the spine of a large leaf frond. They chew through the leaf's ribs so that the fronds of the leaf collapse around them like a tent and shelter them from rain and predators. Brilliant! Nature is so amazing!

I had recently been cautioned by my editor that animal poetry collections would be an almost impossible sell to that house because their list was already full of them. So I looked at the other side. Not the bat, but the leaf. Here was a leaf playing a role that was unexpected. It made me think about what other things leaves might do.

After just a bit of research, I was hooked! I tend to think of the beauty of leaves: the flaming ones in fall, the stark brown ones in winter, etc. Learning about the varied things leaves do was exciting, and I couldn't wait to write about them.

I wrote it mostly in rhyming couplets. I wanted a really short book that kids would listen to, that grown-ups would look forward to reading aloud, and that would spark new interest in kids for a common object.

The manuscript went to two editors. I submitted it to [Carol Hinz at Millbrook](#), and my agent sent

it to an editor at another publisher. I had had close calls at both publishing houses but no books accepted. Carol had really liked my 50 State Poems collection, in fact, and had taken it to Acquisitions, but it was not accepted. She was really enthusiastic about A Leaf Can Be..., and this time, Acquisitions said yes. Yay! It felt like magic that one of the first two editors who read it wanted it. (And the other editor had some leaf books already, so I just got an encouraging rejection from them.)

I'm not sure I should confess this next part. I write fast, and each poem in a collection might come out fast, but a poetry collection always goes through tons of revisions as I try to figure out the right format and structure. And A Leaf Can Be... is not a collection, just one rhyming text. Anyway, it happened at warp speed!

Writers talk about those manuscripts that just flow, that just happen. Well, they don't happen to me! But in this case, I was slamming out that first draft, and when I finished it a couple of hours later, I knew I had something I liked. The rhyming part of the text was only 105 words, and it was just there. I only spent about four hours on it before showing it to Carol, though, which is just insane. I've never sent out a manuscript that was written that fast!

Of course, it still went through revisions, and my critique groups looked at it, and I worked with my editor on it...but still. That initial writing was a whirlwind that kind of makes my head spin!

### **What was the biggest challenge for you in writing this book?**



The biggest challenge for me was that the format of the rhyming pairs of words (shade spiller, mouth filler, etc.). It was so restrictive that I had to leave out several leaf roles I wanted to include.

For instance: mistletoe. In keeping with the two-word structure, all I came up with was "kiss stealer." But mistletoe doesn't steal the kiss; it lets the person steal the kiss. And it was perhaps not a child-friendly enough role to play. A couple of times, I came up with two-word descriptions I loved, but then I couldn't come up with a rhyming line that showed another role leaves play.

Luckily, leaves do so many cool things that I didn't run short. But it was like yanking off a Band-Aid™ every time I deleted a leaf role that I loved.

**You have written a great many poetry collections. What role did poetry play in your childhood? When did you first consider yourself a poet?**

I am chagrined to say that it didn't play any role in my childhood, to my knowledge. I read voraciously, and books were absolutely crucial to my survival. But I don't remember reading poetry. That said, I have a terrible memory and don't recall many specific books.

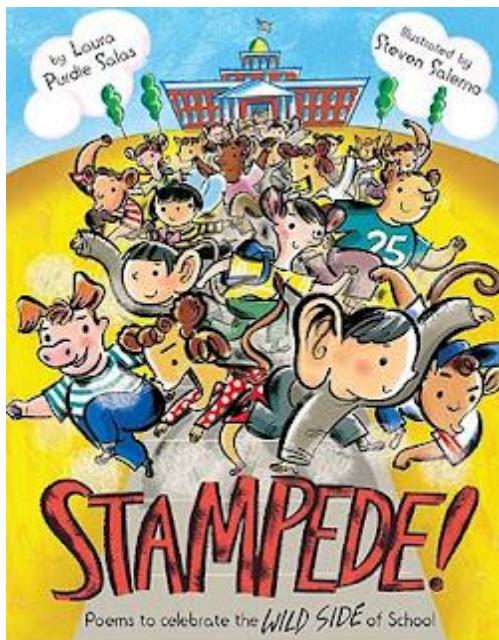
I remember reading a [Tennyson](#) collection of my parents'—my hands would come away from the crumbling leather cover brown and suede-y. And in ninth grade, I got a poetry anthology as a reward from my English teacher. But I mostly immersed myself in story as a kid. Not much poetry or nonfiction—two of my favorite things today!

Poetry came into my life after hearing the late [Barbara Juster Esbensen](#) speak at a local [SCBWI](#) conference. I started reading poetry for kids after that—she was so inspiring.

Then, during a family health crisis, my [SCBWI](#) mentor, [Lisa Westberg Peters](#), suggested I do some freewriting about the crisis.

Freewriting! I am not a freewriter. I am terribly prosaic and results-oriented! But I gave it a try. And poems came out.

Bad poems. But honest ones. That's where my poetry started, and it's been about 12 years since then, I think.



About five years ago, I realized that for every topic that catches my attention, I immediately see it as a poem. It's my first response. When I'm angry, I want to write a poem. If I read a novel I love, there's always a line or two that I take away and save as a kernel of a poem. That's when I started cautiously thinking of myself as a poet. Privately.

It wasn't until [Stampede! Poems to Celebrate the Wild Side of School](#), illustrated by [Steven Salerno](#) (Clarion, 2009) and my set of 10 poetry collections for Capstone Press came out that I actually dared to call myself a poet. It took me a long time to be comfortable calling myself that.

[This wonderful Charles Ghigna poem](#) captures some of feelings about it. A lot of self-identified poets are all talk, no poetry! So I don't go around bragging about it. But I am finally comfortable identifying myself that way because it's me. It's true. I can't help it.

**You also have quite a few picture books and poetry collections that focus on nature. Could you talk a little bit about the role that the outdoors played in your childhood and the role that it plays in your life today?**

I grew up in Florida. I hate hot weather. These two facts do not play nicely together.

I spent much of my childhood avoiding going outside, but my parents were great believers in fresh air (and staying out from under their feet). So, outside I went. But I usually had a book in my hand.

When it wasn't summer or if I was at the water, I loved to be outside. Some of my favorite memories are jumping on our trampoline (a rarity in those days), reading in my tree house, swimming, canoeing, going to the beach, walking endlessly around the block with my best friend, bike riding to see the peacocks, walking and reading the gravestones at [Rollins College](#), hiking the Appalachian Trail, whitewater rafting on the [Chattooga River](#)...

I would never have referred to myself as an outdoorsy kid, but I guess I was. I wasn't a sitter and watcher of nature, though. If I was outside, I was either doing something active, or I was reading.

Today, I still love and value nature. But I mostly get it in tiny bits. A month spent writing in a cabin in the north woods sounds like heaven. But it's not gonna happen. I get tiny bits and pieces. A bit of Nordic skiing in the winter (still waiting for winter right now!). A few minutes lying on a football field, watching gnats and a butterfly buzz around. The sugar maple tree in the parking lot at my gym.

The natural world is totally miraculous to me. I love to read about it, I love to write about it, and I love to see it firsthand when I can. I'm just usually on my way somewhere else when I do see it!

**What routines or rituals have you built into your day that help you focus on your writing?**

Every day is different, but I try to start each morning with morning pages, a quick visit to the blogosphere, and getting organized for the day. My most important habit is that I do my creative writing early in the day, before I have time to get too busy/frantic/efficient to write anything good. I also read at least a few poems every day. And I especially like writing by candlelight (real, electric, or my cool "genii lamp" I got from a writer friend for Christmas).

## **What is your favorite part of the writing process?**

I have two favorite parts.

The first is when the idea is hot and heady, and I'm writing and the words are coming fast. The words might be all wrong, but at that point I don't care.

My second favorite part is when the structure/format of a piece finally gels. I struggle with this. I'll have a good premise and some decent scenes or individual poems. But the piece doesn't work.

Finding the right structure is where I fail the most. But then (if I'm lucky) there's that a-ha moment when the structure becomes obvious and the various pieces of the manuscript all come together in a way that works. It doesn't happen with every project. But it does with the all the ones that get published.

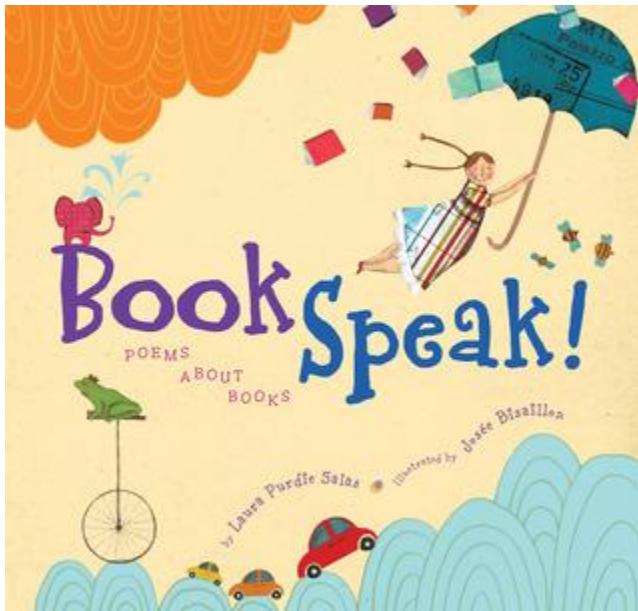
## **What do you do to promote your books? Has your style of promotion changed over the years?**

Promotion is somewhat of a mystery to me. I try to give my books [a showcase online](#), [solicit blog reviews for them](#) and [hope for journal reviews for them](#), and complete appealing materials like [book trailers](#), [teaching guides](#), [postcards](#), etc.

With Stampede, I did an online launch and a bunch of in-person events like storytimes and book signings. I was incredibly uncomfortable with those and found them to be unproductive, so I've cut them out except for at indie bookstores or events that don't feel like I was just the plug-an-author-in-here choice. I do school visits and sometimes have been lucky enough to appear on panels at ALA, NCTE, etc. Those can really help raise visibility—if anyone attends your session!

I am *not* a salesperson. Much of my promotion effort involves having materials there and ready so that if someone hears about my book, they can find extension materials to make the book even better.

And being part of the children's book community, especially online, is huge. I do need to get better at connecting with teachers and librarians, not just other writers, though!



The biggest difference with my newest books (A Leaf Can Be... and [BookSpeak! Poems About Books](#), illustrated by [Josée Bisaillon](#) (Clarion, 2011)) is that I've learned which promotional efforts I hated or seemed like wasted efforts and I've knocked those off my list. I just try to be realistic and do the things I know I can do as painlessly as possible!

My newest books have gotten some nice reviews, and I'm hoping those might help sales and send people online to discover some of the materials I've created. But who knows? I just keep on writing.

**You do a great deal of poetry education for writers, and teachers. What advice do you have for new poets?**

For beginning poets, my best advice is:

1) Read. Read tons of children's poetry being published today.

See [Sylvia Vardell's Best Poetry of the Year lists](#). She's an amazing poetry advocate and helps get the word out about great books.

Other great resources:

[Poetry at Play](#): Daily blog of Poetry Advocates for Children & Young Adults. This will introduce you to many great kids' poets, both contemporary and not.

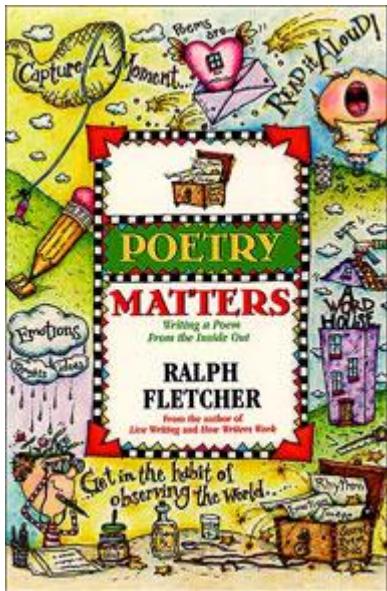
[Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award](#), given by Pennsylvania Center for the Book and other organizations: Check out all the recent winners and honor books—and then read other books by those poets, too!

Same thing for the IRA's [Lee Bennett Hopkins Promising Poet Award](#) (given every three years).

Check out [my blog](#) for some awesome poetry blogs (there's a list in the right sidebar—I'm still adding to it!).

2) Read about writing poetry.

I have a set of essays about writing poetry on my website. They're called [Poetic Pursuits](#).



There are some fantastic books on how to write poems for kids. I especially love [Ralph Fletcher's Poetry Matters: Writing a Poem from the Inside Out](#) (HarperCollins)(recently got my old, tattered copy signed at NCTE!), [Paul B. Janeczko's Seeing the Blue Between](#) (Random House, 2006), and [Myra Cohn Livingston's Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry](#) (HarperCollins, 1991). There are many wonderful books about writing poetry in general, and all of their good information applies to poetry for kids and teens, as well.

3) Write poems daily. I say that, but when I started writing poems, it was hit or miss. For a long time, I only wrote poems about very emotional topics. But if I had realized then that I actually wanted to be a poet, I would have written more regularly. So if you *know*, reading this, that you want to write poetry, then do it as often as you can!

4) Have fun! Poetry is an adventure! Write freely. Write new things. Write stupid things. Write unsellable things (you will do this whether you're trying to or not).

5) Eventually, get feedback. Once you've been writing for a while, share your poems with your critique group or with a professional critique. It took me that long before I even had any idea what I was doing. I could have shortened that time with some good feedback. But a lot of stuff I had to learn just be writing one poem and then another and then another. And I still am learning what I'm doing! So give yourself some time to grow as a poet.

I am half of [Mentors for Rent](#), an hourly mentoring service for people who write for kids and teens. [Lisa Bullard](#) and I are happy to work with poets, but sometimes people write a quick verse

and expect to sell it. It takes a lot of poems, hundreds for most people, before you're at the point of being ready to submit regularly.



I say that not to discourage people but because poetry is both an art and a craft. You have to work on your craft before your work is ready to submit. The art of it—well, some people are just born poets, and they have it, that magic, right away.

But the truth is, they need that time learning the craft, studying the marketplace by reading poems voraciously, and getting feedback to learn whether they're achieving what they hope to just as much as any other poet.

I hope this doesn't sound snotty. I love working with beginning poets! But because children's poetry can *look* easy, many people underestimate the time and effort it takes to do it well. And they underestimate the joy it will bring them.

It's always a treat to work with people who are just getting passionate about poetry, who are discovering everything it can offer them.

### *Cynsational Notes*



[More on Kate Hosford](#)

[Kate Hosford](#) grew up in Waitsfield, Vermont, and graduated from Amherst College in 1988. She was happy to return to her home state to attend [Vermont College of Fine Arts](#), where she received her MFA in [Writing for Children and Young Adults](#) in 2011.

Before becoming a writer, Kate worked as a foster care worker, a teacher, and an illustrator.

Kate is publishing three picture books with Carolrhoda Books, a division of Lerner Publishing Group: [Big Bouffant](#) (spring, 2011), its sequel, Big Birthday (spring 2012), and Infinity and Me (fall, 2012). She loves writing picture books, children's poetry and middle grade novels.

She has lived in India, Germany and Hong Kong, but presently resides in Brooklyn, New York with her husband and two sons.

Posted by [Cynthia Leitich Smith](#) at [8:56 AM](#)   
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**10 comments:**



[tanita davis](#) said...

I'm so happy that someone else is celebrating the full scope of Laura's work. She is truly one of the hardest working poets I know, and deserves to have her star ascend.

[Tuesday, March 27, 2012 9:29:00 AM](#) 



[Janet Wong](#) said...

"I looked at the other side. Not the bat, but the leaf." Laura: Even your "regular talk" is poetry!! I so enjoyed reading this interview!

[Tuesday, March 27, 2012 10:06:00 AM](#) 



[Deb Lund](#) said...

Yes! That meeting of nonfiction and poetry can be so powerful. Lovely post, and with such depth.

As a teacher I used all the books mentioned and I'm glad to find them here. Another

book, more recently published, that I now use with kids is NEST, NOOK, AND CRANNY by Susan Blackaby. It's another lovely nonfiction collection, and it uses a variety of poetry styles.

Kate, you don't sound snotty at all! I remember the excitement I used to feel when parents would say something like "my son is a reluctant writer" because it was a challenge and joy to get them all writing, especially poetry.

Thank you, both of you, for supporting kids and teachers.

[Wednesday, March 28, 2012 12:32:00 AM](#) 



[catherinemjohnson.wordpress.com](#) said...

What a fantastic post. I've almost finished a book of silly zoo poems, which is going to be a really hard sell.

I need to get reading all these books right away. Thanks a lot!

[Wednesday, March 28, 2012 4:56:00 AM](#) 



[Julie Larios](#) said...

Fine interview of a fine writer! Thanks, Laura, for the answers, and thanks, Cyn, for the questions.

[Wednesday, March 28, 2012 5:12:00 AM](#) 

[laurasalas](#) said...

Thanks, Tanita and Janet. And extra thanks to Cyn and Kate. What an honor to be featured here!

[Wednesday, March 28, 2012 6:34:00 AM](#) 

[Ed DeCaria](#) said...

Laura, you really are an inspiration for other poets / "people who write what they think is poetry".

Looks like I've got about a dozen books to buy and another three hours of online reading

to do just based on the links within this interview.

Great questions and, again, very insightful/inspiring answers.

Thank you, both.

-Ed

[Wednesday, March 28, 2012 1:24:00 PM](#) 

[Debbie Levy](#) said...

Great interview--the kind where you read every word!

[Wednesday, March 28, 2012 7:42:00 PM](#) 

[Kate Hosford](#) said...

Thanks everyone. Laura was delightful to interview and is such a rich source of information. I'm glad you all enjoyed the interview.

[Sunday, April 01, 2012 3:30:00 PM](#) 

[Cynthia Leitich Smith](#) said...

Tanita, thanks for the cheers! I'm a Laura fan to be sure.

Agreed, Janet! That line was a standout for me, too.

Thanks for the reading recommendation, Deb!

Catherine, good luck with your silly zoo poems! We're all rooting for you.

Thanks, Julie, for chiming in! So glad you enjoyed it.

Ed, it sounds like we left you with homework--enjoy!

Thanks, Debbie!

And Laura, you are a rock star. I so appreciate you're sharing your thoughts! Kudos to Kate, too!

[Wednesday, April 04, 2012 2:47:00 PM](#) 