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20 July 2011



Wild Adventures

Journalist Angela Posada-Swofford lives her dreams of exploration, weaving them into stories that help kids realize that the magical stuff isn't just in Harry Potter books, but right outside their window

By Karen-Janine Cohen.



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It wasn't Angela Posada-Swofford's first brush with penguins. But there she was, on the Antarctic Peninsula with black-and-white birds strutting behind her. In front of her: a laptop, wirelessly transmitting the scene to children at five Latin American science museums.

"Penguins are the little people of the ice," Posada-Swofford says. "They are so much like us, I think that is why we feel so attracted to them." They too, have their cliques, misbehaving kids, disputes and reconciliations, and above all, a commitment to their babies. "Penguins are supreme, splendid parents, especially the two Antarctic kinds, the Adélie and the emperor," she says. "Life is so harsh, that each chick is the biggest treasure they can have. So both males and females have the most developed 'maternal' instincts." To bring the penguins even closer to the children, watching from Colombia, Mexico, Chile and Costa Rica, Posada-Swofford moved the laptop from its stand to the ice: bird-level. One penguin waddled over to check things out, and gave Posada-Swofford's foot a peck.

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“The kids were screaming with delight, you could hear them,” she says. Posada-Swofford was able to transmit her enthusiasm, as well as images, to the kids, some of whom, though living close to jungles and wilderness, seldom had the chance to commune with nature. It was the first such transmission from the ecological site on Torgersen Island, reached only after four days of rough sailing, including a voyage across the Drake Passage. Posada-Swofford was one of a select handful of journalists to make the 2009 trip. She was, in fact, the first Hispanic journalist to be awarded the Logan Science Journalism Program’s polar fellowship, which is given by MBL (the Marine Biological Laboratory), in Woods Hole, Mass. She would stay for a month, working alongside scientists, focused on what the peninsula’s sensitive ecology could reveal about climate change. It is just one of a long list of intrepid science adventures undertaken by Posada-Swofford, who has parlayed the profession of journalism into opportunities to travel around the world, and delve deeply into many scientific fields, from space exploration to ocean ecosystems.

Posada-Swofford, who turned 51 in February, has cruised in underwater research vessels, walked through Bolivian jungles, hunted fossils in northern Canada, and been to the Antarctic – twice! She’s stood by the hippo pools of Zimbabwe, and volunteers in Florida at the Marine Mammal Conservancy. A previous penguin experience was had in South Africa where she helped care for orphaned chicks after an oil spill. The shrill cries of the baby birds seemed to say “feed me,” Posada-Swofford says. “ ‘And if you cannot feed me, then hug me.’ ” Posada-Swofford, who began her U.S. journalism career at El Nuevo Herald, freelances for a number of publications, writing in both English and Spanish. Based in Miami Beach, she is the U.S. correspondent for *Muy Interesante* magazine – for which she recently wrote a story about the four women of primate research, Jane Goodall (chimps), Biruté Galdikas (orangutans) Claudine André (bonobos) and Emma Stokes (gorillas).

Reaching across Divides

Such achievements might be the final professional destination for many journalists. Yet Posada-Swofford has taken her experiences and used them as the framework for a series of children’s adventure books, written in Spanish, that brings the excitement of scientific discovery to a new audience, primarily in Latin America.

“There is a need,” she says.

While the region’s rich and varied literary tradition has many books for young people, there remains a niche, she says, for “science and nature combined as an adventure.” Some kids, she says, never even get a chance to visit a science museum.

Her books include both empathetic characters and exciting plots, founded on recent research. The planned 15-volume series (seven are already in print) feature Aunt Abi, and four children who use science to solve mysteries. Efforts are underway to increase access to the books in the U.S. and translate them into English. The idea of writing books based on her reporting came from friend Mauricio Quintero. But inspiration for the structure and themes arrived full-blown one day, when she was home, doing chores.

Influencing her was the popular British author, Enid Blyton, whom she read as a child. “She had this series of adventure books – four kids and a dog were detectives.”

The books, published by Grupo Planeta, are aimed at school-age children and young teens and have such thrilling titles as *Dinosaurios Sumergidos* (Submerged Dinosaurs) and *En Busca del Calamar del Abismo* (The Search for the Squid of the Abyss). Both contain elements of Posada-Swofford’s own adventures aboard the ocean drilling research vessel *Joides Resolution* (which stands for “Joint Oceanographic Institutions for Deep Earth Sampling”). The odd-looking ship once searched for oil deposits. Scientists now use its derrick to sample ocean floor cores for research – which has included bringing up evidence supporting the theory that an asteroid hit was, indeed, the main factor in the demise of the dinosaurs. *En Busca del Calamar del Abismo* finds Aunt Abi and the

kids on an imaginary underwater research lab, that sinks to the depths after an earthquake. There, they, and the scientist with them, become fascinated by the idea of finding the biggest giant squid of all. And they do – discovering that the gargantuan mollusk is as interested in them, as they are in it.

The squid “goes from angry to surprised to curious,” Posada-Swofford explains, adding that the book teaches kids about the ecosystem of the deep, hydrothermal vents, technology designed for exploring the ocean floor, the physiology of diving, and how scientists live and work in an ocean research ship. On a recent trip to Colombia, her birthplace, Posada-Swofford spoke at local schools about her work and the books. Teachers had assigned the stories as required reading. When she arrived, her audience was ready, peppering her with questions, comments and suggestions. They also gave her the papier-mâché sculptures they made, which included several iterations of dinosaur and an orange squid embracing a hapless ship.

The books, “inspired these kids in ways I never imagined,” Posada-Swofford says, adding that children write her fan letters, and poems. “I want to give science a sense of wonder and magic.”

Those kinds of efforts can make a huge difference says Andrea Santy, who works in international education at the World Wildlife Fund.

“It is innovative, and very much needed,” she says. In some countries, she adds, people may live near parks and private reserves, but may never have the chance to visit, due to a lack of the type of infrastructure U.S. citizens take for granted – such as roads, educational partnerships and tours. “People don’t have the opportunity to explore and see what is in their own backyard.”

Santy spent much of 2000 in the tropical lowlands of Costa Rica, working at a small community center where she led a regularly scheduled eco-walk for local youth. While some countries, such as Mexico, excel in hands-on science education, especially for young kids, other countries still have some catching up to do, she says. “I think there is limited understanding of the connectivity of how habitats and animals are all intertwined.” That’s where books like Posada-Swofford’s may make a real difference. “Just the fact that she is providing this opportunity for kids to engage in conservation in Spanish is fabulous,” she says of Posada-Swofford, who she did not previously know of. “To have kids be proactive about their learning is a huge component.”

A Strong Start

Posada-Swofford knew early on what she wanted. She just wasn’t sure how to get there. She grew up in Bogota, the fourth child of her eye-surgeon dad, and stay-at-home mom. She was fascinated by animals. Summers spent in Cartagena meant swimming and diving. “I always envisioned myself as a huge explorer of the world,” she says. “I really did not think it was possible, but in the eye of my imagination I would see myself getting into caves and jungles -- and I ended up doing everything.” She also believes some of her enthusiasm comes down from her maternal grandfather (via DNA or family lore) Frederick Leslie Rockwood, an Englishman who became an officer in the U.S. Navy after emigrating from Britain. He was sent to Colombia as a naval attache. There he met Posada-Swofford’s grandmother and “never looked back,” she says. “He loved Colombia.” Indeed, Posada-Swofford puts one in mind of those celebrated Victorian-era explorer-adventurer-correspondents who at the drop of a pith helmet would join an expedition to remote African jungles, or unexplored South American tributaries, sending back dispatches that would keep London audiences enthralled for months.

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She aimed to become a marine biologist, but advanced training was scarce in 70s Colombia. Instead, she studied modern languages. Then her sister suggested she pursue a journalism career – where she could at least write about what she loved. Posada-Swofford never looked back. After getting a start in Colombia, she earned a master's in journalism at the University of Kansas, specializing in science and environmental writing. After a move to Miami, she began working at El Nuevo Herald, first as a translator, later in positions as varied as travel and food editor. In 1995, the Society of Professional Journalists awarded her first prize in the enterprise and investigative category for a series on the illegal wildlife trade she wrote for The Miami Herald.

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Posada-Swofford argued with editors to get such stories into the papers, says Juan Carlos Perez-Duthie, a freelance reporter who met Posada-Swofford when he worked at the paper. "Back in the

day, it was hard to get coverage,” he says. “Angela is the person who never wavered in covering the topics that are her passion, and she believes in.” She would not accept the belief of some editors, who said that there was no audience for such stories, he recalls. “She would always find an audience,” he says. “She believes there is a way of communicating effectively to readers and making the topics meaningful, relevant and simple to understand.” A transformational opportunity came in 2001, when she won a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship at MIT. She had learned about the fellowship through her membership in the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. “I have become great at writing requests,” she says. Posada-Swafford was the first Hispanic journalist to be awarded the fellowship.

That yearlong program allowed Posada-Swafford to take any class she wanted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Harvard University, both in Boston. She took every geology class offered. “I love the hard sciences, and the earth sciences,” she says. And, crucially, she came to know the professors who put together expeditions. That is how she happened to accompany Professor Samuel Bowring to Trepassey, Newfoundland, to search for the planet’s oldest fossils. “I had to go and hammer those rocks,” she says. Then it was back to MIT to seek for clues under a mass spectrometer microscope. Meanwhile, Discover magazine wanted a story, and funded part of the expedition. That assignment didn’t pan out due to extenuating circumstances outside of Posada-Swafford’s control. So, she reached out to *Muy Interesante*, for which she’s been writing ever since.

While learning academics, she also had the chance to get closer to researchers, which helped them feel comfortable opening up with her. “I’ve learned to earn it by working with the scientists side-by-side,” she says. “They trust the journalist who does the legwork.” Her enthusiasm and knowledge comes across to the scientists she meets. “She is an extremely quick study,” says Ross MacPhee, curator of Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. He met Posada-Swafford on the ship carrying them both from Antarctica, where MacPhee and his team had found fossil evidence of early emerging bird species. “She got what we were doing instantly,” he says.

And her skills have paid off. Posada-Swafford, has written for a variety of English and Spanish magazines and newspapers, and produced science and environmental stories for CBS Telenovelas, and The Travel Channel. In 2006, she was the first Hispanic journalist to be invited to the South Pole by the National Science Foundation. Last year she won the first annual SACYR Science Journalism Prize, Europe’s top award for science writing, for a piece she penned on nanotechnology. She has long participated in and led science writing seminars, conferences and workshops, including in Africa and Latin America through a USAID program. This year, she led a seminar at Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (FNPI), the journalism foundation created by Nobel Prize winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

“In Latin America there is a need for training in science and environmental journalism,” she says. Traditionally, she notes, universities in the region have not offered such specialized training, though that is now changing.

Bringing it all Back Home

Posada-Swafford is also co-chairing the Society of Environmental Journalist (SEJ) conference, held this year in Miami, where journalists from all over the hemisphere will gather in October (PODER is one of the media partners of the conference).

It’s a good bet Posada-Swafford will be in the middle of it all, likely translating for reporters whose English is not so fluent, perhaps leading one of the seminars in multimedia journalism – or shepherding fellow writers on a trip to the Everglades.

Sooner or later, though, she will make her way back to the Marine Mammal Conservancy in Key Largo. There, like other volunteers, she will take her turn caring for creatures in need, as she did several years ago, when about 100 rough tooth dolphins beached themselves.

For hours, she walked through the water with an ailing dolphin. “There was a connection,” she says.

"I never knew she was a journalist," says Robert Lingenfelter, a founder of the group. "She just comes, and pulls shifts, and shows up when we have events and training, and gets re-qualified. She is willing to get dirty and do whatever needs to be done. And she is good in the water with animals."

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