



Author Spotlight – Renee Hills



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Author: **Renee Hills**

Renee, tell us a little about how your book *Turtle Love* came to be and why the story was so important for you to tell.

Turtle Love began as a conversation with a friend. We were on an idyllic North Queensland beach, standing in the shade of wispy casuarinas on a perfect mid-winter day. The breeze sighed through the foliage and gentle waves slapped the golden sand.

The beach is home to a small human community and a myriad of coastal creatures. Occasionally on adjacent beaches, vulnerable flatback turtle hatchlings emerge from nests in summer. (Vulnerable means that the species is likely to become endangered unless the circumstances threatening its survival and reproduction improve. Vulnerability is mainly caused by habitat loss or destruction of the species' home).

Nearby, two jetties of a huge coal loading facility stalked more than 1.5 kilometres out to sea and poured coal into ships from a 67-hectare stockpile, 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Robyn was extremely worried about plans to build yet another facility on an almost pristine beach to the north where flatback turtles nest.

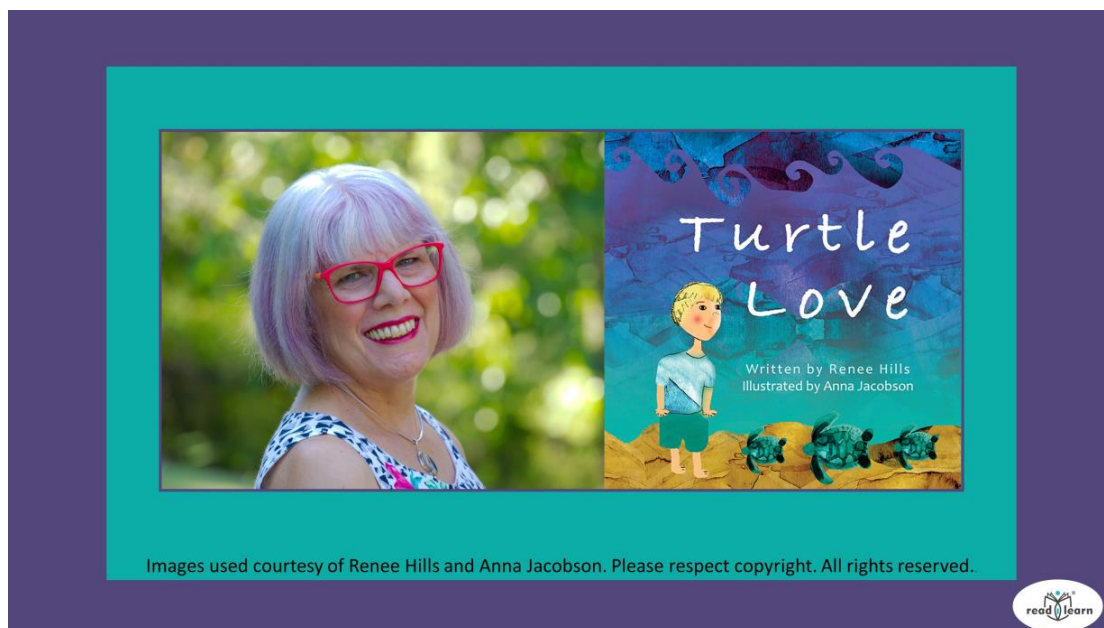
I had just begun to focus on creative writing. Robyn was a talented artist. A children's picture book seemed the perfect way to capture my friend's love for nature and also our childhood memories of carefree holidays on the beach now earmarked for coal port development.

The story became very important for me to tell and publish especially after Robyn died suddenly before she could begin the illustrations. *Turtle Love* became a way to honour her life and our friendship.

In 2017, I also joined climate change activist efforts to stop the proposed massive Adani coal mine and coal port in North Queensland. At the same time, *Turtle Love* was being illustrated and prepared for publication. It became a creative expression of the concern for the planet that my activist colleagues shared.



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When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I've always loved words and writing ever since I realized it was something I was good at (as opposed to classroom calamities with maths). I found my way into journalism, which I loved, after a brief skirmish with secondary teaching. Regretfully, I left journalism to focus on raising my daughters, one of whom had ongoing health issues. Eventually I studied psychology and worked as a school counsellor. I found this a very tough gig and constantly yearned to be writing.

Writing *Turtle Love* introduced me to the wonderfully supportive world of children's literature in Brisbane, including Write Links (I was at the first meeting). I attended many workshops, QWC courses and took online courses on writing in a variety of genres. I also joined a Flash Fiction challenge.

I have ideas for other picture books, middle grade fiction, memoir and family history projects.

Where do you write? Do you like to be by yourself in the quiet, or do you like to write in a noisy space?

I live on a beautiful acreage, so I like to look out on trees when I write. The ideas for *Turtle Love* came while I was writing at a big table on our verandah. When I want a break from the house, I go to Kenmore Library and try to find a space in their quiet area which also looks out over the Brookfield hills. I take my journal, notebook and fountain pen everywhere and often journal in coffee shops.

What do you use to write – pencil and paper or computer?

Mostly I use my extremely portable Toshiba laptop, but I frequently begin a creative piece with fountain pen and paper. Most of my flash fiction begins this way. I love my fountain pen!

When do you write?

I'm just starting a new routine of writing first thing in the morning. Otherwise it's usually in the afternoon after I've done my mandatory gym sessions for a dodgy back.

Did you think of the story in your head before you wrote it?

Turtle Love came to me visually, probably because it is set in such a beautiful place that held very special personal memories. That's why I knew it had to be a picture book.

How did you feel when you wrote Turtle Love?

I felt deep love, especially when I came up with the idea of the original mother flatback turtle giving the pattern on her shell to the coloured rocks. I think I was identifying with the unconditional love most mothers offer their children and the need to leave signposts for the children.

How do you hope readers will feel?

I hope readers feel love and wonder for the turtles and their threatened environment and for our beautiful planet, struggling as it is with challenges of human development and climate change.

Are there any special messages you would like them to discuss?

Humans are having a huge impact on our environment and all species with whom we share the planet. Each of those species has a right to life, to safety, to have a place to call home. We need to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

The illustrations are important in telling your story Turtle Love. Do you like the way Anna Jacobson has illustrated your story?

I'm delighted with the way children and most adults respond to the illustrations. Initially, I was unsure about the style because it was very different to what Robyn and I had visualized. Now I absolutely love them, and I think they really enhance the story.

How much did you need to collaborate with Anna Jacobson in making Turtle Love?

There was extensive collaboration. Anna was very patient as I made changes and responded to my requests so speedily!

What is your favourite picture book?

There are so many beautiful picture books but my favourite when I was writing *Turtle Love* was *Teacup* by Rebecca Young.

Who is your favourite author or illustrator? What do you like about his or her work?

Matt Ottley illustrated *Teacup*. His style varies but the illustrations for *Teacup* started life as large canvasses of muted colour, yet so powerful and inspiring.