



Author Spotlight — Deborah Frenkel



Author: **Deborah Frenkel**

Deborah, what gave you the idea for Naturopolis?

I think there were two things. The first was boredom! I was working as a copywriter in an office tower in the city. I was lucky though because my desk was next to a window, which overlooked the gutter of the neighbouring tower. One day I gazed out the window and noticed a tiny fern growing in the gutter – nine storeys above the street level. Each day it got bigger. I was so impressed by its tenacity.

The other inspiration was at street level. My daughter was just over two, and decided she didn't like the pram. That meant I did a lot of very slow walking, at toddler pace, around our suburb – and as anyone who has ever spent time with a toddler knows, they find EVERYTHING fascinating. Moss, weeds, puddles, ants... I spent a lot of time peering at the ground with her.

And I realised that just like my friend the fern, there are so many living things that surround us in the urban environment. They're easy to overlook – but once you see them, you realise they're everywhere.

Why was it important for you to write Naturopolis?

Gosh, I think it's so vital to feel connected with other living things. As humans, we often think of 'the environment' as elsewhere – like out in the bush, in the wilderness – but it's right here, living alongside us – as my toddler daughter reminded me. WE are part of nature too, and so is our built environment. And it's fascinating! I wanted to create something that would remind kids (and their grown-ups) to continue to crouch down and inspect the living things at their feet, no matter how old they are.

What do you like best about your story as a finished book? How does it make you feel?

It's just so beautiful! Ingrid Bartkowiak is a fine artist, and it shows – she's turned my words into such an immersive, rich and detailed world. I love how there's something new to notice each time you look at it.

How do you hope others will feel and/or respond when they read it?

I'd love it if they feel inspired to venture outside and notice the nature that surrounds them – wherever they live. And I'd be thrilled if the scientific text ignites a curiosity to identify the species around them and investigate further.

What do you think of Ingrid Bartkowiak's illustrations?

They're exquisite! She has managed to strike this incredible balance between art and science. I love her visual wit, too, which deepens and strengthens the story. Did you spot the sushi soy sauce fish next to the zooplankton?

Some of the city buildings are like those in Brisbane. I know Ingrid is based in Brisbane, but you live in Melbourne. Did you have any say in how Ingrid illustrated the book?

I was consulted throughout, but I was mostly an appreciative onlooker! I actually love that it's not overtly Melbourne, or Brisbane for that matter – the city in the story is a hybrid of many cities around Australia. I intentionally selected species that could be found in many different urban environments, but not in an identifiable single city.

Do you have a favourite illustration? What do you like about it?

I love the ghost mushroom illustration. It's such a mix of the mundane and the fantastical – the littered soft drink cup and chip packet, with these oh-so-strange, glow-in-the-dark fungi nestled between. And I like that the ant is like an intrepid explorer, bravely venturing forth through the spooky darkness.

Do you have a favourite page? Why is it important to you?

The final page where the ant's nest is revealed makes my heart beat a little faster! I love the shift in perspective – we suddenly see the whole ant society: the queen, the workers, the eggs and our intrepid scout ant arriving home from her epic adventure (I say her because it's a fact that all worker and scout ants are female – the males die soon after mating!). I hope the parallel of the human city and the ant city inspires conversations and imaginations.

The book is what is called creative non-fiction. The story is written in verse with beautiful literary features such as similes, metaphors, alliteration and some rhyme. Each page also includes a snippet of information about, including the scientific name for, what is featured on the page. Which came first – the verse or the science? How was the decision made to include both?

The verse came first. I loved the idea of tracing a poetic journey of the ant from the inner city garbage bin to the giant ant colony, via these tiny vignettes which shine a light on the natural world along the way.

But I realised pretty quickly that I couldn't highlight these scraps of nature without knowing what they actually were. I needed to use the full illuminative power of science! Thank goodness for the internet. I used resources like the [Atlas of Living Australia](#) and the websites of the various state-based museums, and also talked to some university academics to help identify the best ant species to feature.

In the end, I think the verse and the scientific text balance each other out – they are two ways of looking at the same thing. Both are true and necessary in different ways.

How do you hope teachers will use the book in the classroom?

There are so many ways! I can imagine this could be a jumping off point for many possible explorations. Can students find the little scraps of nature around the school? Can they write their own verses, featuring the species they find? Can they create their own ant farm in the classroom and observe the ant city that arises?

What are the most important messages in the book that parents and teachers may discuss with their children?

There's a lot that could be drawn out as a discussion point. I think the interconnectedness of humans and nature is an interesting point to discuss – and an increasingly topical one as we all deal with climate change.

Now let's talk about you as a writer. When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I think I was writing stories as soon as I learned to hold a pencil – from early primary school. I was given lots of blank notebooks for birthdays and always filled them up with rhymes and silly illustrations in my spare time. That was my 'thing'. From high school I knew writing and language was what I was strongest at, but it took a while until I started to write for a living.

What other books have you written or what other writing do you do?

My day job is copywriting – which is writing for ads and marketing. So, I write everyday – but a lot of it is taglines, or the words for radio or TV ads or billboards, even things like the often-unnoticed words on the side of cereal boxes and coffee cups. (Words surround us every day, just like nature I guess!).

As well as that, for the last few years I've been writing for kids in my spare time. *Naturopolis* is my first book, and my second *The Sydney Harbour Fairy* (which is also a picture book, but very different!) will be out next year. (There are others on the way too, but I can't say anything yet!)

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

Give me quiet!! Hah. I have small kids, so quiet is very appealing... but very hard to come by. So, I write whenever I can – in the scraps of time and the cracks between other things.

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

Computer, but often even before that point, the Notepad app on my phone. (See above point re: kids and finding scraps of time to write!).

When do you get your ideas?

All the time! But if I'm stuck, I especially find going for a walk gets ideas going. I truly think the brain and the feet are directly connected. Or at least mine are!

Do you think of the story in your head before you write it? Does it take shape as you write? Or do you plan everything in advance?

It takes shape along the way. I do plan a little, but it's usually the random thoughts that fall in place on their own that really make the story. I think the subconscious is pretty powerful. Once you give it a problem to work out, it will continue to puzzle at it quietly in the background while you do something else.

Do you have any advice for children as writers?

There's no such thing as a stupid story!

What is your favourite picture book?

This answer will vary for me day to day – but today, *How to Make a Bird* by Meg McKinlay and Matt Ottley.

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

This also varies day to day! But authors I've read lately and loved include Toni Jordan (*Dinner with the Schnabels*), Sarah Armstrong (*Big Magic*) and Maggie Jankuloska (*The Ratcatcher's Apprentice*). I also follow Brian Bilston's poetry on social media – his humour and playful creativity with words always inspires me!

List five things that bring you joy.

Going for a walk with a coffee and a podcast. Hearing my kids play together (before the inevitable crash/smash/scream!). Reading in the sunshine. When governments take climate action! Stringing together words that sing.

Find out more about the Deborah Frenkel from her website: <http://deborahfrenkel.com/>