



# Meet Author Dr. Elin Kelsey

Following the success of *You Are Stardust, Wild Ideas* — the new book from Elin Kelsey — shows that humans aren't the only ones who have problems: every living creature has them, too. From pigeons procrastinating to dung beetles finding direction by the Milky Way, the ways in which living things address their problems are often unexpected and always fascinating.

Elin Kelsey is an educator, researcher, environmental consultant and award-winning author. She has received rave reviews from *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews* for her more than a dozen environment- and science-based books for children and adults, including *You Are Stardust* and *Not Your Typical Book about the Environment*. She lives in Pacific Grove, California.

Here, she talks more about how *Wild Ideas* champions creative problem solving, inspiring kids to think inventively and come up with their own solutions.

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## Q: What sparked the idea for this book?

**A:** Whenever I watch a bird wrestling high winds at the beach or a squirrel tightrope-walking along a power line, I marvel at animals' capability to solve problems. I admire the way they manage to survive and thrive with just their bodies and each other — no smartphones or clothes or houses or grocery stores to rely on. I started talking with scientists about how different animals solve problems, and I discovered that many of the strategies they use, we use: things like teamwork, cooperation, relying on friends, and building safe places to rest. I am passionately interested in the interconnections between our lives and the lives of the more than five million other species that live on planet earth. Problems are just a normal part of life, whether you are a cricket or a chihuahua or a kid.

## Q: What makes this book relevant right now?

**A:** From bats who eavesdrop on where other bats are catching the tastiest food to parrots who recognize music by different composers and move to the rhythm of each piece, current scientific journals reveal more and more evidence of the active capacity of other species to learn from, respond to, and influence the world around them.

*Wild Ideas* celebrates the ability of all kinds of species to creatively problem solve. It champions a growing body of scientific evidence that demands that we unshackle ourselves from the Great Chain of Being that has privileged an elevated place for humans vis-à-vis other species since it first emerged in ancient Greece. Not so long ago, we looked down on those who dared to give human attributes to animals. Now, anthropomorphism itself seems arrogant. The astonishing recovery of humpback whales in the Pacific, for example, is occurring despite the fact that these animals live in oceans that grow ten-fold noisier from shipping traffic each decade and that suffer from high levels of over-fishing and marine pollution. Cetacean biologists believe it is the capacity of humpback whales to social network, to actively learn from successful hunting and social strategies used by other individual whales, that drives that recovery.

If squirrels learn to cross roads by watching people, and baby clownfish learn to cope in increasingly acidic oceans, it is time to throw off outdated ideas about the fixedness of nature and recognize and support the agency of other species to survive, create, and thrive. We are not the only species actively responding to crisis. To me, that is a deeply hopeful idea that I want to share with young readers.

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**Q: How did you feel about the public reaction to *You Are Stardust*? In what ways does *Wild Ideas* build on *You Are Stardust*, and in what ways does it go in a completely new direction?**

**A:** I have been very moved by the personal responses people have had to *You Are Stardust*. I love to convey the idea to kids that we simply *are* nature. It doesn't matter if we're sitting at a desk at school or playing on a smartphone, we still drink the same water that dinosaurs drank and have to sort out problems just like other animals have to do. Both *You Are Stardust* and *Wild Ideas* celebrate our intimate connections to the other-than-human world.

*You Are Stardust* resonated with both children and adults. Parents and librarians have sent such positive feedback. American singer/songwriter Luke Dick sent me a YouTube clip of "Connected," a song inspired by the book's message. A woman in Saskatchewan wrote to ask if she could use the book as the basis of a sermon in her church. Grandparents tell me about special times reading it with their grandchildren. Couples read it to one another at their weddings.

*Wild Ideas* carries the same deeply personal message that we are all part of this remarkable natural world. It also celebrates the agency, or ability to shape our lives, that humans have in common with other animals. Finding creative ways to deal with problems, and appreciating the relationships that help us through them, are not uniquely human traits. They are qualities we share with and can learn from other species.

**Q: Tell us a bit about your research process. How did you encounter some of these wild ideas?**

**A:** In the past decade or so, scientists have discovered many new things about the emotional and intellectual lives of other species. What's becoming clear is that lots of individual animals are unique and different from other members of their families or populations, and they create specific ways of dealing with things. I base all of my books on first-person interviews with scientists because I believe kids should have access to cutting-edge ideas. I read a lot of scientific journals and follow environmental news online. I also am lucky enough to travel to many places in the world, like Antarctica and Australia, where I can see animals and talk to the people who study them.

**Q: Which wild idea from the book do you find especially awesome or inspiring?**

**A:** Can I pick more than one? I love the idea that hyenas change the way they hunt depending on the skill level of the other hyenas with whom they are hunting. They change the game to get the best out of each other's abilities. I also find it astonishing that dung beetles rely on stars to find their way.

**Q: How does *Wild Ideas* extend your environmental work and help young readers develop a sense of kinship with the earth?**

**A:** I am concerned that so many kids are inundated with doom and gloom messages about the state of the planet. They don't get to hear that they are not the only ones working to make things better. Humpback whales have returned to historic population numbers, even in oceans that face problems from pollution and noise, because they rely on social networks between whales to learn new ways of surviving and thriving. Mother trees in forests actively spread their energy to other trees and plants when they are dying. Realizing that we are part of this living, changing, learning planet is a very hopeful idea.

**Q: Your narrative voice maintains a bit of mystery. You don't give *all* the answers — you present the essence of research to evoke a certain feeling, rather than making the science overt. What next steps do you hope your text inspires readers to take?**

**A:** When I first started writing non-fiction books, I wrote a lot of explanations. How different plants and animals do things is fascinating to me. But a very wise editor, Marybeth Leatherdale, encouraged me to think more about writing in a way that encouraged exploration, rather than settling for explanation. I have found that this opens up lots more opportunities for readers and for me to ponder and wonder and appreciate. It is a more powerful way to connect with the unique ways we each see the world.

**Q: Why do you think illustrator Soyeon Kim's art is particularly well suited to this book?**

**A:** Soyeon's dioramas are filled with artistry, feelings, and imagination. She captures the excitement and beauty of what it feels like to have a great idea.

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**Q: *Wild Ideas* contains an incredible diversity of landscapes, children, and animals. In what ways is diversity important to creative thinking?**

**A:** I think one of the reasons we feel so worried about the planet is that we are constantly told a dead-end story about what is going to happen. Yet every day, I hear about plants or animals or other people who don't fit that single story. Environmental problems are critically important. So are the problems kids face in their lives. But we aren't likely to find elegant, meaningful solutions if we are told everything is wrecked and there is no hope. We need to believe that creative solutions exist and to nurture the conditions that enable them to bloom.

**Q: You've mentioned elsewhere that, when talking with kids or adults about environmental topics, you start by asking, "How do you feel when you think about the environment?" How do you hope readers will feel coming away from this book? What do you hope they take away about their place on the planet?**

**A:** I hope readers will feel the thrill of excitement that comes when you are surprised. That's how I felt when I found out that some squirrels learn to cross busy roads by watching people. It made me appreciate how much learning and sharing is happening on the planet, in ways that I never imagined. It reminds me how infinitely surprising and wonderful life is. I hope readers feel the same way.

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