

• Meet the Author •

Meet Cynthia and Greg Leitich Smith

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).



Cynthia Leitich Smith grew up in the mid- to southwest, wrote poems as a kid and became a journalist in junior high school. She completed journalism school in Kansas and law school in Michigan. Cynthia is the author of *Jingle Dancer*, illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu (William Morrow and Company, 2000), *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* (HarperCollins, 2001), *Indian Shoes* (HarperCollins, 2002), *Tantalize* (Candlewick Press, 2007), and numerous short stories. She also teaches at the Vermont College MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults.

Greg Leitich Smith grew up in Chicago, completed two engineering degrees—one in Illinois, the other in Texas, and went on to graduate from law school in Michigan. He is the author of *Ninjas*, *Piranhas*, and *Galileo* (Little, Brown and Company,

2003), and *Tofu and T. rex* (Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

The Smiths met in law school and now make their home in Austin, Texas. *Santa Knows*, illustrated by Steve Bjorkman (Dutton, 2006) is their first joint book.

It is fairly uncommon for writing spouses to co-author a children's book. Please share the origin of the story idea and your process in developing it.

CLS & GLS: Cynthia initially came up with the idea of writing a very contemporary Christmas picture book—one that would be funny, larger than life, and appeal to both girls and boys.

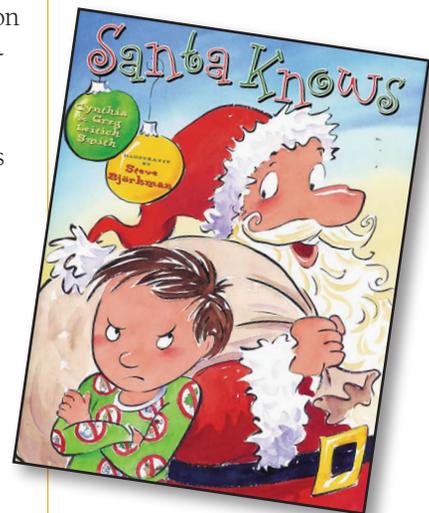
We brainstormed possible ways to “attack” the plausibility of Santa Claus and his mission. Since doubts would be based on our understanding of the modern world, etc., Santa himself had to come from something larger and be couched in terms that today's kids would accept (Clarke's Law, of course, is that any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic).

Alfie F. Snorklepuss emerged as sort of a 21st century “grinch” for the new generation. When it

came to Santa, he was a doubter and loud about it. So, of course, his sister Noelle had to be the one with all the faith (faith in Santa *and* faith in Alfie).

Cynthia used her background in journalism to figure out how Alfie would get his message out, and Greg used his background in engineering to frame Santa's rebuttal.

With that foundation, Cynthia generated a draft, which we passed back and forth and discussed over cocoa and Christmas carols (in July). Our agent then found an editor, who had about four pages of suggestions for us. We discussed these, and then Greg generated a new draft, which we exchanged a few times, again over cocoa and carols.



Quite obviously, you two enjoy Christmas. As children, did you have any particular Santa doubts that informed this story? Any stories to tell about your own childhood Christmases?

CLS & GLS: We do not and have never doubted Santa.

How do you two generally celebrate Christmas?

CLS & GLS: We lead a wonderful but hectic life with much speaking and traveling.

November is always especially busy because Cynthia is a Native American author and has done related books—*Jingle Dancer* (William Morrow and Company, 2000), *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* (HarperCollins, 2001), and *Indian Shoes* (HarperCollins, 2002). So, she is often called upon for related celebrations across the country.

By December, we're ready for a quiet Christmas at home. Greg is the family cook, and we typically enjoy the traditional turkey dinner.

Greg, I know that you are an engineer as well as a patent attorney. How did your technical background influence the character of Alfie and the unfolding of the plot?

GLS: We wanted to make the story of Santa plausible to logical thinkers, while retaining the "magic" and wonder of it all. It also had to ring true to 21st century readers, which is why we put in all the types of mass media that are available to kids

today. That said, we wanted to retain all of the Santa traditions as best we could. So, elf science and technology—or magic? It's your call.

A picture book generally takes many paths before the final path becomes clear. What are some of the plot or character elements that didn't work for you before you hit upon this brilliant and completely logical explanation of how Santa manages to deliver presents all over the world on a single night?

CLS & GLS: We don't recall that many difficulties putting the book together once we had the logistics of Santa worked out. When we received our editorial letter, though, we found that our editor wanted us to simplify it somewhat, to retain the gist but without, say, any tesseract or Teflon-coated sled runners (for frictionless riding when there's no snow).

You are both novelists as well as picture book authors. How is the process of writing a picture book—especially a joint project—different from your novel-writing process?

CLS & GLS: With novels, Cynthia writes the first draft only between midnight and four a.m., and she does a lot of pre-writing, character, and world-building exercises. She also typically throws away the first draft and starts over, as this allows her to get a feel for the characters and story without the expectation

that anyone else will read it. For Greg, the process is similarly involved. He doesn't do as much pre-writing and doesn't outline, but he does enough work to know whom the characters are and where they are going to end up. Both approaches take a significant amount of time.

In contrast, while we needed to do some research for *Santa Knows*, the process was more narrowly focused. While challenging in other ways, the picture book itself is less massive of an undertaking. Also, you're able to hold the whole story in your mind.

How can readers learn more about each of you and your books?

CLS & GLS: Cynthia may be found on the Web at www.cynthialeitichsmith.com and Greg at www.gregleitichsmith.com. More about *Santa Knows* can be found at www.santa-knows.com.

❖ ❖ ❖

Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of five picture books, most recently *Fire Up With Reading!* (*UpstartBooks*, 2007) and *Our Librarian Won't Tell Us ANYTHING! A Mrs. Skorupski Story* (*UpstartBooks*, 2006) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.