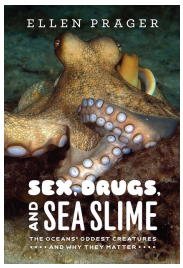
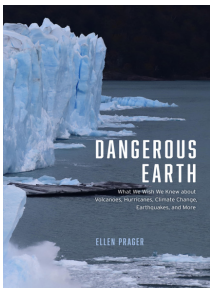
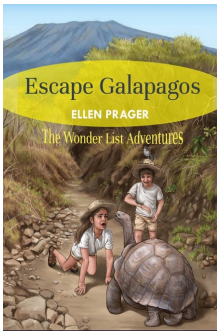
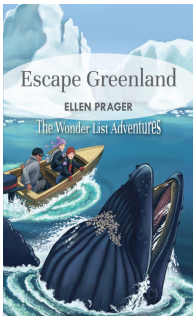
An Interview with Dr. Ellen Prager









August, 2021 Featured Guest
at
Time with Tannia
(http://ww.timewithtannia.com)

By:

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés

1.) You are a marine scientist, author, freelance writer, consultant, chief scientist for StormCenter Communications, and science advisor to Celebrity Cruises in the Galapagos Islands. Which one of these is both more rewarding professionally and personally?

It is difficult to put one job above the others as the rewards and satisfaction come in different forms. I am very proud of my work becoming and being a marine scientist. The ocean is vital to our planet and our lives, thus understanding all we can about it is critical. I also love working with Celebrity Cruises in the Galapagos alongside the local naturalists to give the guests the best experience in terms of science, communications, and fun, of course. And watching them experience the Galapagos for the first time. And besides who could complain about having to go to the Galapagos several times a year (non-pandemic) - and getting paid for it. My work with StormCenter Communications is important for society as we bring their patented geospatial technology, GeoCollaborate, to the table to help put trusted data into the hands of decision makers.

But overall, while not financially rewarding, the most fun and personally rewarding has to be writing adventure books for middle graders that combine action, humor and relatable characters with fun learning about science and nature. With small grants I've also been able to give books to in-need students and schools. For some kids, it is the first book they've ever owned. I love interacting with the public,

especially kids. Educators, parents, and young readers send me funny and inspiring notes. Hugs are even better. Several times these kids have brought me to tears - happy tears- with their response, including autistic children and teens. My only wish there is that I could get greater visibility for the books to bring them to more young readers, but with a small non-profit publisher and no "Celebrity" name, that's tough. Still the overall experience had been extraordinarily rewarding and inspiring.

2.) When writing your popular science book, *"Sex, Drugs, and Sea Slime: The Oceans' Oddest Creatures and Why They Matter,"* you took an entertaining look at marine biodiversity, its relevance to the average person, and why ocean life and resources are now at risk. Apart from its provocative title, how have your readers reacted to it? Did you reach your goal?

The response to that book was and continues to be fantastic from people across the board, including scientists, educators, senior citizens and students. Some educators are even using it in the classroom as a supplement to textbooks. And yes, I felt that I did meet my goal of making science entertaining while explaining why biodiversity is important and at risk. Even though it was published several years ago, the message still resonates today - maybe more than ever.

3.) Climate change has forced us to be more mindful of the causes and the effects our behavior has on the planet. Was your passion for education and concern about the environment that inspired you to write your latest release, "*Dangerous Earth: What We Wish We Knew About Volcanoes, Hurricanes, Climate Change, Earthquakes, and More"*?

Partly yes. Whenever I write a book, I need to be passionate and interested in the topic myself as well as hoping others will be. In this case, I loved the idea of writing about what we don't know instead of everything we do know about the phenomenon involved. As it is the unknown that fuels research, drives creativity and innovation, and can cause great surprises - especially the unknown unknowns. It was really interesting talking to leading scientists in the fields I covered and it enabled me to visit Ilulissat, Greenland (climate change) as well as Hawaii and Washington State (volcanoes). My concern is for the environment, but also for people. Much of the book relates to what can be done to save lives and property.

4.) I find it fascinating that although you have a Ph.D., your author name is Ellen Prager. However, when doing consultations then you are Dr. Ellen Prager. Is there a reason behind that decision?

Often my publishers do not want me to use Dr. or Ph.D. as they feel it will scare away readers thinking I write too technically. The people who know me or my writing know that I definitely write for a lay audience, but I understand the concern. And it could be a factor in attracting a new audience and reaching beyond the choir, which is something I strive for.

5.) Now let us talk about Ellen, the middle school author. What events have a pivotal effect that prompted you to tackle the challenging YA genre?

Having published younger children's illustrated books and popular science (high school and above) books, I was asked why I had not done anything ocean focused for middle graders. It was something I had not considered at the time. But then I realized what an important age middle grade is. Kids are beginning to explore interests that could lead to careers, lifelong hobbies or ethics. They have tremendous influence over their peers and parents. I decided to do a little homework and see what sort of books middle grade readers tend to like best. Low and behold adventure fiction series were at the top.

6.) Your "Tristan Hunt and the Sea Guardians Series" (Mighty Media Press) shows some influences from the X-Men and Animorphs series, except your characters have special underwater skills. Will it remain as a trilogy, or would you still surprise us with another adventure?

The real inspiration for the stories (though I don't think it is copying as there are many differences) were Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson books. I loved the combination of adventure and sarcastic humor with Greek mythology. I saw it as an excellent vehicle to bring fun learning about real science and nature to my readers. I have gotten numerous requests for a fourth book in the series, but unfortunately the publisher has chosen not to go ahead with another book. But never say never. Who knows what the future will bring.

7.) How does your new "Escape..." series differ from the Tristan Hunt adventures? Reasons to change the publisher?

The Wonder List Adventures series is quite different from the Sea Guardians books. The books feature family dynamics between sister and brother along with father. And there are no super powers involved. But like the previous books, they include great action, adventure, sarcastic humor and relatable characters with teenage angst. I had hoped to engage a larger mainstream publisher, but unfortunately the genre of eco - science - adventure does not seem to be one that they are interested in, even though I get absolutely amazing reviews. So, I was thankful when Tumblehome Books stepped in. They focus on making science learning fun, which is right up my alley. But it does make it very difficult to get widespread visibility and distribution - sadly.

8.) In a nutshell, please share with our readers the storyline of both books in the series: "Escape Galapagos" and "Escape Greenland." What inspired both escape strategies?

The premise for the books is that Ezzy and Luke Skylars' mother has passed away and to honor her adventurous spirit and love of nature, their father, Dr. Skylar, promises to take his kids to all of the places on his late wife's Wonder List. The Galapagos Islands is number one on the list, but when they go they get more adventure than they bargained for when their cruise ship is hijacked. In book #2, they go to number two on the Wonder List, Ilulissat, Greenland. And once again, Ezzy, Luke and their father find themselves embroiled in an evil scheme and are put in danger. Both stories were inspired by the amazing nature, landscapes, and wildlife of the two locations, Ezzy and Luke's characters, and issues based on real-world problems such as wildlife smuggling and climate change.

9.) Have you considered incorporating the unique characters of the Tristan Hunt series to help Ezzy and Luke "Escape" from their next ordeal?

I have not, but again never say never. I did sneak a reference to ***"The Shark Whisperer"*** book into ***"Escape Greenland."***

10.) Now let us talk about your marine biologist movie consultant experience for the Disney movie: Moana. Please share with us the journey. Do you consider this experience and having your name listed among the contributors a validation of your work?

One day out of the blue I got a phone call from Disney. They wanted to know if I could help them to learn about the ocean and what it should look and behave like for an upcoming animated movie. WHAT? YES! YES! YES! It was a dream phone call for me and I also put them in touch with the wonderful Captain Peg Brandon at Sea Education Association to discuss navigation and sailing. I had put my name on a list with the Science and Entertainment Exchange offering advise on ocean related projects and lo and behold it worked!!! Captain Peg and I did a video call with the producers and animators to answer their questions and then later when I was in California giving a talk at the Aquarium of the Pacific,

I drove up to Burbank and gave a talk in the auditorium at Disney Studios about the ocean, different conditions, and other things I thought they might be interested in. They had a lot of fun and interesting questions. I LOVED it. And when I saw my name on the credits I was thrilled. And there is at least one line that definitely came from something I said in my talk. How cool is that! One of my goals has been and continues to be to make science entertaining to engage a wider audience. Young readers often comment that my adventure novels should be made into movies . . . how about it Disney?

11.) How can our readers contact you and buy your books?

I love getting notes, comments, and questions from readers! They can follow me on twitter @elprager and tweet me, they can also find me on Facebook or Instagram. Or just email me at pragere@earthlink.net! And they can buy my books online or at their favorite booksellers. If an online or in-store seller doesn't have a book in stock, they can almost always order them through their distributors.

12.) A word of advice to help us understand the importance of the ocean when dealing with our climate change dilemma.

The ocean has absorbed about 93 percent of the excess heat due to climate change. It is a critically important part of the atmosphere-ocean-land system we call Earth. The ocean also helps to distribute heat on the planet, much of our oxygen comes from phytoplankton in the sea, fisheries provide an important source of protein for billions of people, coral reefs, mangroves, and wetlands protect the shore from storms and waves, and the ocean provides a huge source of economic revenue through industries such as tourism and recreation. With climate change the impacts on the ocean are numerous and scary from rising sea level to increased seawater temperatures that are causing catastrophic mortality of corals and driving submarine melting of ice shelves and glaciers. More carbon dioxide is being absorbed in the ocean causing it to become more acidic, which impacts many marine organisms, particularly those with shells of calcium carbonate. Then there's the issue of increasingly strong hurricanes due to higher ocean temperatures. Rather than go on, which I could, I will reference your readers to the first and longest chapter in my book, ***"Dangerous Earth: What We Wish We Knew About Volcanoes, Hurricanes, Climate Change, Earthquakes, and More."***

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés, author of *El Espejo de mi Alma* (BoD 2015) .
Author's website: www.timewithtannia.com **Stock photography website:**
https://www.bigstockphoto.com/search/?contributor=Boricua63&safesearch=n
Gift Shop: http://www.zazzle.com/teolpuertorico

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