

Dear Reader,

I hope this moment finds you well, as we begin to step forward from the sorrows and challenges of the pandemic. For my part, I was never more grateful to be a writer.

On that note, I'm excited to introduce my latest middle grade title, *Anybody Here Seen Frenchie?*

This book began with an unexplainable little seed that planted itself late at night. I was almost asleep when I sat up and reached for my low-tech essentials—the 3 x 5 cards I keep on my nightstand. I wrote down two fragments:

flapping and tweeting

a bowl in the earth

When I looked back at my scribblings in the morning, I remembered what I'd seen in my mind's eye. Slight spoiler alert: it struck me that I'd found an ending. Time to build the journey!

I had been thinking about a pair of middle graders who find in each other something both of them desperately need: friendship. In this case, it is a friendship nuanced by neurodiversity and the vastness of the autism spectrum. I was particularly interested in this question: What happens when one friend becomes better able to employ strategies that expand their social abilities than the other?

Loud, exuberant Aurora, and nonvocal Frenchie fell into my ear. I spent the long months of the pandemic listening to

them and finding a sort of poetry in their exchanges, activities, and family lifeways. (When I feel myself falling in love with my characters, I start to trust that I can get them ready for you.)

Meanwhile, I had repeatedly spotted a rare piebald deer in the woods near my home. This creature seamlessly added inspiration and fuel to the storyline, as did the endless enchantments of coastal Maine, where this story is set.

For me, *Anybody Here Seen Frenchie?* is a story about meeting people where they are, which, I have learned puts us in a place where we discover more about our similarities than our differences.

Special thanks to those of you who have read my books in the past. Your faith and kind words stay with me from story to story. You are my strongest inspiration.

With warmth and gratitude,
Leslie