



'Travels with Gannon & Wyatt' Launches Middle-Grade Series

By Sally Lodge | Jun 13, 2013

Twin brothers on a family African safari vacation save a wounded lioness and her cubs from poachers in *Travels with Gannon & Wyatt: Botswana*, released this month by Austin, Tex.-based Greenleaf Book Group. Written by Patti Wheeler and Keith Hemstreet, the novel launches a middle-grade travel adventure series told through the journals of the brothers, characters based on Wheeler's twin sons, Gannon and Wyatt. Though the stories are fictional, they are rooted in the real-life travels of the authors and the twins and emphasize the concepts of global citizenship, multiculturalism, and wildlife conservation.



Wheeler, whose love of travel blossomed during her years working as a flight attendant, says that the seeds of the series were planted on a trip to Polynesia she and her husband, Tom, took some 10 years ago with their boys (now 18), and Hemstreet and his wife, Heidi, a teacher who for several years homeschooled Gannon and Wyatt.

"We had a colorful guide who told us great stories about Polynesian culture," Wheeler recalls. "He took us to see a turtle being released into the water from a rescue facility for injured wildlife. While Keith was videotaping the release, I was watching the expression on my children's faces, and that was so compelling that the experience inspired me to create a book series that would share moments like this – a single boat expedition that encompassed wildlife, global citizenship, and conservation – with other children, and show them how an event like that can resonate."

Though that was "a light bulb moment," according to Hemstreet, the idea of creating a book series – with online video and photographic components to supplement it – took some time to germinate. "Initially, we'd sit down and talk about it over dinner, and each time we'd get a little further, and finally Patti said, 'Okay, I'm done talking about this. Let's do it!'"

The authors, both residents of Aspen, Colo., then set to work devising a process for creating the series, whose future installments will send the fictional Gannon and Wyatt to the British Columbia rainforest, Egypt, Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, Tanzania, and the American West. "Before we travel to each place we write about, we do a lot of research to learn about the country, its culture, history, environment, and wildlife," Hemstreet explains. "In each location, we pair up with guides who give us an authentic experience. We photograph, video, talk about what we've seen, and journal every night, so we have lots to draw from when we get back home."

Avid travel journal keepers as children, the authors decided that telling the stories through the fictional boys' journals "was a natural way to do it," says Hemstreet, a self-described avid fan of

the journalistic documentations of such explorers as Lewis and Clark, David Livingstone, and Captain James Cook. Though the books are the focal point of the series, [the Gannon & Wyatt Web site](#) also features travel photos and videos narrated by Wheeler's sons.

Bringing the Project to Life

Wheeler and Hemstreet first self-published the inaugural novel, *Travels with Gannon & Wyatt: Botswana*, in 2010, and the book received numerous indie press awards.



Those accolades encouraged the authors to aim for wider notice, and they contacted Catherine Frank, a former editor at Viking Children's Books, who now runs Catherine Frank Editorial Services. Frank helped Wheeler and Hemstreet reshape their first novel and develop a format for the series, which the authors then sold to Greenleaf Publishing Group.

"I think the reading level and content are spot-on for middle grade readers, particularly boys," says Frank. "The stories feel like a modern update of a classic adventure or travel tale. Gannon and Wyatt are tech-savvy kids, but their gadgets and specialized gear can't protect them all the time. That Patti and Keith have included so many facts and details about each country and culture explored in the books feels almost like a bonus."

Another plus, adds Frank, is *Travel with Gannon & Wyatt's* authenticity. "The authors' first-hand travel experience is really invaluable when it comes to establishing a believable setting and characters," she says. "More than once I've had to ask, 'Did that really happen, or is this a fictional part?' Thankfully, Patti and Keith assured me the real Gannon and Wyatt were never within inches of being mauled by lions!"



With the books' environmental and cultural messages, the authors clearly have high hopes for the series's potential impact on kids. The second installment, *Travels with Gannon & Wyatt: Great Bear Rainforest*, comes out in October. "Our philosophy is 'The world is our classroom,' and getting children, librarians, and educators excited about this family adventure series is very important to us," says Wheeler. "It's kind of like slipping kids veggies without letting them know what they're eating. As a parent, I know it's important to find creative ways to get kids excited about their world. This series is our way of doing that – and giving back."

***Travels with Gannon & Wyatt: Botswana* by Patti Wheeler and Keith Hemstreet. Greenleaf Book Group, \$12.95 June ISBN 978-1-60832-586-3**