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Locals turn true travels into 'Gannon & Wyatt' children's books

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What began as family vacations for Old Snowmass resident Patti Wheeler and her sons are now being transformed into series of adventure books aimed at youngsters.

Wheeler and co-author Keith Hemstreet, of Aspen, published the second book in their "Travels with Gannon & Wyatt" series this month with Greenleaf Book Group Press. The new book follows the boys — based on Wheeler's twin sons of the same names — on an adventure in Great Bear Rainforest. The third, sending the boys to Egypt, is scheduled to be published in January.

They expect to publish at least a dozen books in the series.

The books use the Wheelers' travels as a jumping off point for short novels that recall the swashbuckling, globetrotting spirit of young Indiana Jones, but with an educational undercurrent.

Art imitates life on the boys' fictional adventures. For example, on a trip in Africa's Kalahari Desert, the Wheelers tracked a white rhino, eventually coming across one with a baby that threatened to charge them. Wheeler and Hemstreet fictionalized the experience in the series' first book, "Travels with Gannon & Wyatt: Botswana," which came out in June.

"Luckily, we made it out unscathed, but it was a very frightening experience," Wheeler said via email Friday. "We knew right away that some version of that experience was going to be in the book."

Aimed at readers between ages 9 and 12, the books include travel journals in the tradition of Lewis and Clark, and narratives that explore world cultures and natural wonders. Each includes maps of the region Gannon and Wyatt explore, along with photos and translations of local phrases.

The aim is to inspire kids' imaginations, while also introducing them to ideas about global citizenship, multiculturalism and conservation.

In the books, the boys are sent on adventures through the Youth Exploration Society (YES). Wheeler and Hemstreet have founded a real nonprofit of the same name, which supports literacy programs with book donations and author readings.

"This is just a starting point," said Hemstreet. "We have big plans for YES."

Eventually, they hope to expand the nonprofit to bring young people to the types of exotic locales depicted in the books, to promote geographical, cultural and environmental understanding.

As for the real-life twins, they're now both 18-year-old college freshmen.

"Gannon and Wyatt love the book series and get a kick out of the fictional characters," said Wheeler.

Wheeler and Hemstreet have continued traveling to research new destinations where they can send the fictional Gannon and Wyatt.

"While there, we tour with expert guides, take thousands of photographs, hours of video, and keep a journal of everything we learn," Hemstreet said. "Once we're home we compile all of our material and Patti and I go to work."

Wheeler and Hemstreet began working on the "Gannon & Wyatt" idea five years ago. They independently printed the Botswana book, and the limited printing in 2011 unexpectedly won a few national children's book prizes and was a finalist for the Colorado Book Award. Those accolades helped the pair get Greenleaf on board to publish the entire "Gannon & Wyatt" series.

Wheeler and Hemstreet are currently working on the fourth book — an Arctic adventure in Greenland — and hope to write 12 books in all.

"Basically, we'll keep writing as long as the kids keep reading," said Wheeler.

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A young adult book series was recently launched by local authors Patti Wheeler and Keith Hemstreet.

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