



## **Our Interview with Poet Allia Zobel Nolan**



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in everything. I always have my "antenna" up,  
and try to deeply experience everything.**

**Sally from the Norwalk Public Library:** Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Allia! You have a poem in our **2019 Art & Text booklet**, “Whispers of Ireland,” which we’ll talk about—and read—later.

First, I know you write a lot of poems and books for children. Before we get to talking about your many publications, could you share with us how you began writing for children, and what inspired you?

**Allia:** I’ve been blessed in that I see a book or an article or a poem in everything. I always have my “antenna” up, and try to deeply experience everything. Everything is fodder. I don’t own a Smart Phone (I just have a plain cell), so my head is not stuck in cyberspace all day. But, even before the Smart Phone, I’ve always been an observer. I don’t walk down the street oblivious to everything in a world all my own. I’m there, in the present, soaking up everything I see, hear, and smell. All of my senses are at attention.

That’s how I started writing for children. I’d see or hear something, and my inner self would say, “Hey, that would make a great book, write that down, kids would love that.” Then, I would canvass magazines like *Highlights*, or *321 Contact*, to see if they’d want to do a story. Or I’d canvass the local paper to see if they were interested in a piece. Writing professionally on staff for kids came later when I joined **Readers’ Digest Children’s Publishing** as a senior editor for children’s religious books.

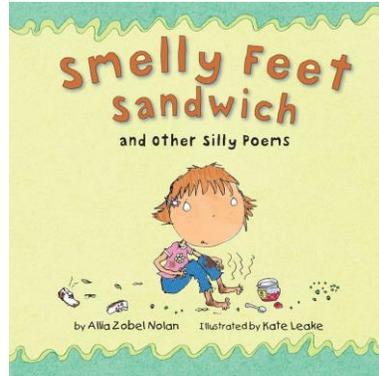


I started out writing for adults—humor—and that involved cats. “They”— whoever “they” are—say you should “write what you know.” I’ve always had, and loved, cats, so that was easy for me. They are such brilliant animals; funny, sensitive, beautiful, caring, and they do the funniest things. At the same time, they can also be annoying, and naughty!



**Sally:** I know you have some silly verses for kids (they are wonderful!!). Please tell us about them!

**Allia:** When writing for kids, I generally go to my “kid place;” that is, I get into the mindset of a child and think about how they would approach things. Kids are often silly, and they love being silly. So I wrote a book (which is out of print now), called *Smelly Feet Sandwiches and Other Silly Poems*.



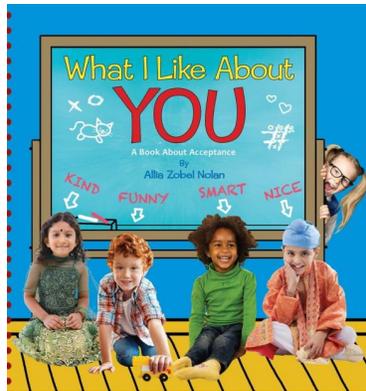
*Smelly Feet Sandwiches and Other Silly Poems* touched on subjects like how to deal with a tooth that’s about to come out (a wiggly tooth), and how annoying adults are when they pinch a kid’s cheeks, and what to do with a box full of worms under your bed when your mom forbade you to play with worms, or why is it that a baby can burp and it’s okay, but if you’re older and burp, people get upset. Stuff like that.

I am hungry; I am starving.  
But I don’t know what to eat.  
So I sit beside the frid-a-daire  
and stare down at my feet.

They are dirty; they are smelly.  
They remind me of some cheese.  
Do you think they might be tasty  
with some jelly toast with peas?

I also think about what it’s like to be a kid, what with bullying, and trying to fit in, and trying not to be a sore loser or a complainer.

When I write books about God for kids, I either write Bible stories, or I try to write books that will help kids understand the world around them. My most recent book, *What I Like About You: A Book About Acceptance*, focuses on getting kids to accept others who aren’t their mirror image.



Here's a rhyme from *What I Like About You: A Book About Acceptance*:

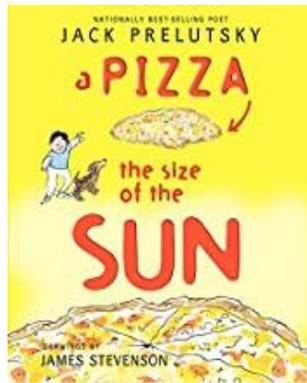
I really like the food you eat. And chopsticks, boy, they're super neat.  
I use them to eat rice and fish.  
But octopus (Ewww!) ... is not my dish.

**Sally:** Have you also written more serious poems for children?

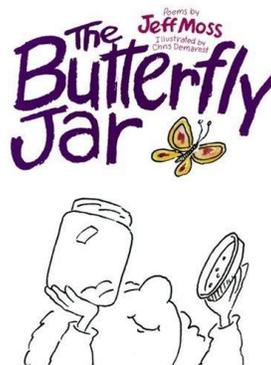
**Allia:** I don't think very young children—and this is my own personal opinion— would engage with serious poetry. Generally, their first introduction to books comes in the way of rhymed material, “sing-song-y” type of rhymes that they can repeat and learn. I have a friend whose granddaughter doesn't know how to read. However, after her granddad read her one of my books several times, she memorized the words, and recited them when reading the book.

**Sally:** Were there any poems for children that inspired you, or struck you, when you were a child? Any favorite poets?

**Allia:** My inspiration came from reading books by **Jack Prelutsky** and **Shel Silverstein**, two super authors. It also came from reading a lot of children's picture books that were filled with poetry. Poetry has a certain cadence, a certain musical beat to it. You can hear it when you read poetry out loud, and when you're writing it. If it “sticks,” if it doesn't flow, then you have to get re-writing.



My all-time favorite is Jeff Moss, who wrote *The Butterfly Jar*. I would read these poems, “listen” to the rhythm they had, and then try to write my own.



**Sally:** Did poetry help you in any way when you were growing up?

**Allia:** Poetry was actually my introduction to writing itself. When I was growing up, and later in my teens and early twenties, I wrote a lot of poetry as an outlet. I wrote when I was happy or sad or annoyed or frustrated, or when I found something beautiful or ugly. It was a way for me to express my thoughts, a kind of catharsis. I wrote things like, “Ode to My High Intensity Lamp,” and “Buzz Off, Bee,” (about a bee trying to eat my ice cream cone). I wrote silly poems like, “Ah Choo,” a poem about what my sneezes cause (“breezes in Mexico,”). Back then, I wrote exclusively for myself. I never wrote with any thought of being published. I just wrote because I enjoyed the process, and I felt I had accomplished something after the writing was over; if not for anyone else, at least for myself.

**Sally:** Do you, in turn, try to help children with your own poems, and books?

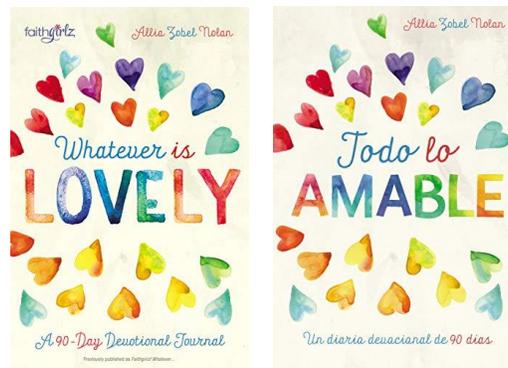
**Allia:** When I do school visits, or library events, I sometimes invite children to “write” their own poems. I did a session once called, **Poetry from A to Z: The Yokes on You**. During that session, I gave kids some prompt words and told them to write a poem with those words. I was fascinated by their creativity, and what they came up with. I also told them to keep their “audience” in mind when writing anything they want others to enjoy. Use words and ideas that the reader can relate to.

**Sally:** Is it only poetry that you write for children, or do you write fiction and nonfiction, as well?

**Allia:** I’m in the process of writing a fiction Young Adult coming-of-age book about (what else?) a cat and her “hooman.”



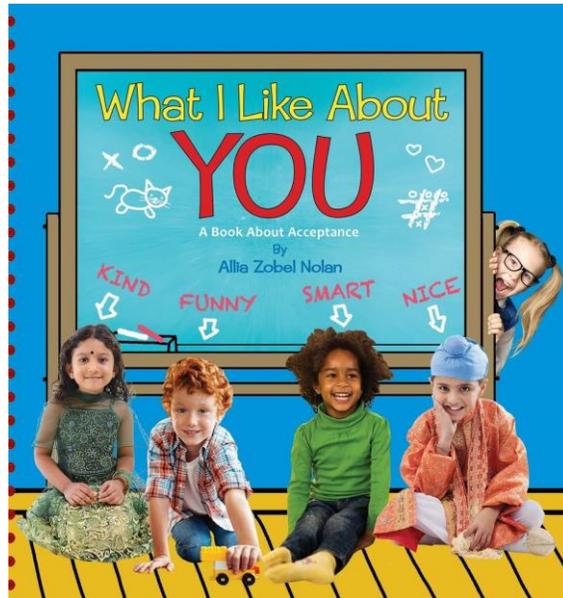
However, I mostly write picture books and Bible titles for kids. I did write a YA devotional for Harper Christian, called **Whatever is Lovely: A 90-Day Devotional and Journal**, due out—in both English and Spanish—in February, 2021:



**Sally:** You have so many publications of children’s books. Please share with us your most recent!!

**Allia:** My most recent children’s book (2020) is **What I Like About You: A Book About Acceptance**. It’s a colorful, engaging book that helps parents, educators, and clergy teach

children to accept and celebrate the worth of others. It shows children that friends come in all sizes, shapes, and colors. It encourages children to make friends with others based on— not what they look like, or where they come from— how they act.



**It won a 2020 Indie Best Children’s Picture Book Award!**

<https://indiebookawards.com/winners/list>



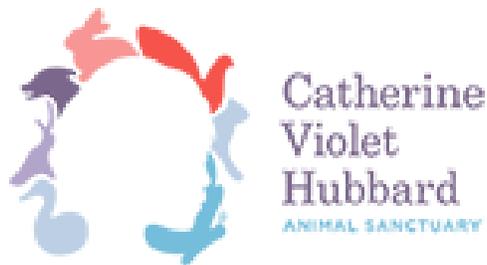
Instead of illustrations, I used fun photos of kids that readers will relate to, diversity messages, instructive notes for parents and children, and playful charts so that children can keep track of new friends.



I'm hoping the book will be used by schools, churches, and other organizations to foster acceptance, and to celebrate the uniqueness of all children.

**What's more, one dollar of the sale of each book  
will be donated to the**

**Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary in Newtown, CT:**



<https://www.cvhfoundation.org/about/>

The **Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary** was created in memory of Catherine Violet Hubbard, a six-year-old girl who loved animals, and who was a victim in the tragedy of Sandy Hook. "The Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary is that wish

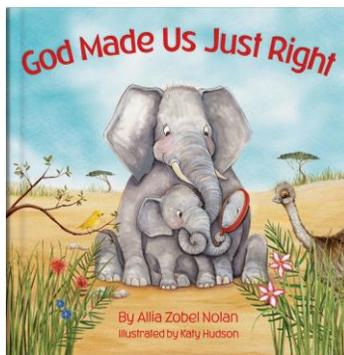
fulfilled for a little girl lost too soon.” “A place where all creatures will know they are safe and people are kind.”

Links to purchasing *What I Like About You: A Book About Acceptance*

can be found here:

<https://www.alliawrites.com/books/what-i-like-about-you-a-book-about-acceptance/>

I have another book coming out in February from Kregel Publishers: *God Made Us Just Right*. It’s a board book for youngsters that focuses, again, on diversity. This book gets the diversity message across using the vehicle of animals, each unique with something different to offer. The art, by Katy Hudson, is really sweet.



I think little ones will really enjoy it. The message it puts forward is that God loves diversity, and has made all animals and all children different on purpose. Children need not compare themselves with others because God made them “just right.”

**Sally:** Do you often read your books to children at libraries and bookstores, or churches, etc.?

**Allia:** Whenever I get a chance, I do events with children. Lately, because of COVID, obviously, I haven't been able to. **If any readers of this Poetry Page would like to schedule a school visit, and/or book signing, they can contact me through my website email address. As soon as the pandemic is over, and we can gather again in groups, I will resume my events!**

[VISIT ALLIA'S WEBSITE HERE!](#)

**Sally:** Do you illustrate your own books? Or do you have any creative involvement with that aspect of publishing? How does this work?

**Allia:** I'm not an artist, so I don't illustrate my books. However, the publisher usually involves me in the choice and/or recommendation of an artist/illustrator. Now, that doesn't seal the deal: the artist has to pass muster with the publisher, has to be affordable, and be available to do the work in the allotted timeframe.

When I worked for **Readers' Digest Children's Publishing**, I often helped the art department write what is known as an "artist's brief." That is a kind of guide to the artist as to what we expect to see on each page. For example, I would let them know we wanted illustrations of children who are a specific age, we wanted diversity in the drawings where the action is taking place, etc.. The artist would then do a "pencil drawing" as a kind of draft, and then, after some tweaks, she/he might go to color, meaning he/she would do the final.

**Sally:** What adult books have you written? Please share a few of your favorites. Are they poetry, fiction, nonfiction?

**Allia:** You can see all of my books on [my Amazon.com Author Page](#).

Two adult books that I published myself in 2020, after the rights reverted to me, are ***The***

***Worrywart's Prayer Book: 40 "Help-Me-Get-a-Grip God" Meditations and Prayers, and Why A Cat Is Still Better than A Man.***



And of course, my favorite book of essays (which I wrote with others from the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop) is called ***Laugh Out Loud: 40 Women Humorists Celebrate Then and Now...Before We Forget***. Cynde Lahey, Director of Library Information Services at the Norwalk Public Library, arranged an **AuthorSpeak** for that book. I had loads of fun talking about it!



**Sally:** Please share with us any literary journals, newspapers, etc. in which you've been published.

**Allia:** Here are just a few: *The New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *Hartford Courant*, *The Norwalk Hour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Huffington Post*.

**Sally:** What advice might you give to writers?

**Allia:** My advice to writers is to persevere, and never give up. My first book was refused by dozens of publishers. Nowadays, too, if you can't get a traditional publisher, and you thoroughly believe in your book, and can afford it, you can publish it yourself.

**Sally:** Your poem in our **Art & Text** booklet—"Whispers of Ireland"—is a beautiful poem. I remember when I was designing the Art & Text booklet, I asked you which poem you would like me to include, and you stressed this one above your children's poems. I sensed then that this poem meant a great deal to you. Could you please tell us about this beautiful poem, and why it means so much to you?

**Allia:** "Whispers of Ireland" is one of my favorite serious poems. I wrote it on one of my first visits to Ireland. I was so overwhelmed on seeing the beauty and mystery of that country—the traditions, the legends, the people—that I just sat in the car and outlined the poem. Then, when we got to where we were staying in Cork, I wrote it out. I love it because it always takes me back to a specific time and place, and the imagery brings back the sites, smells, and vistas of a land to which I feel thoroughly connected.

**Sally:** What activities do you enjoy when you are not writing? Reading, gardening? Family?

**Allia:** When I'm not writing, I'm reading. I devour books, and especially love historical fiction.

I enjoy going on motorcycle trips with my husband.



And, of course, I can't pass a bookstore without going in!



**Sally:** You are such a joy, Allia! I am so happy to be featuring you on the Poetry Page!



**Now, Allia's poems...**

## Whispers of Ireland

*By Allia Zobel Nolan*

I look at you, my love  
and see the verdant hills I long for,  
rising and falling  
with the rhythm of your breath.

Would I could embrace the land  
as I hold you now—  
letting the brown dirt  
seep into my pores.

I would run down  
one side of the glen  
and fall, and roll,  
and get up to repeat  
the same again  
Til breathless I would  
lie stretched out  
facing the sky  
pulling up tufts of green  
to inhale.

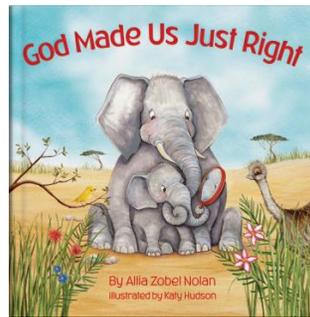
The sun would shine  
And I would look straight at it.  
absorbing its light,  
its strength;  
its power.  
And I would take deep gulps  
of the air  
and store them in my memory.

Spirits who haven't  
spoken in years would welcome me.  
whispering old wives tales in my ear—  
stories of the sea ,  
and the rocks,  
and the people.  
And I would get itchy for a pen.  
So I would turn,  
and sigh,  
and kiss the ground.  
Then, I'd get up,  
and I'd go home—  
knowing I had just been there.

From Allia's forthcoming book, *God Made Us Just Right*—a penguin answers his daughter's question about her wings:

I wiggle and I waddle, Dad.  
But other birds can fly.  
Why didn't God give me the kind of wings  
that glide up high?

God made us so we sail and soar--  
But do that underwater.  
He gave us flapping flipper wings  
For swimming swiftly, daughter.



From Allia's new book, *What I Like About You: A Book About Acceptance*:

The world would be a boring place  
If everyone was the same race.  
I like your smile. I love your hair.  
If you were blue, I wouldn't care.

