
REVIEWS AND TESTIMONIALS

While we wait for published book reviews, please enjoy this article published in the St. Petersburg Times newspaper on 5/18/07 (www.sptimes.com).

Teen's ferret inspires a book

By Jackie Ripley - ODESSA - Trixie the ferret romps around with enough energy for a whole pack of ferrets. But it's the 4-year-old's love of digging that moved her owner, Ellie Willingham, to write a book based on Trixie's exploits.

The book, *Wildwood*, takes place in an old Western mining town where ferrets work the mine and wage war with coyote-riding raccoons. But the strangeness doesn't stop there. In *Wildwood*, dogs run the local police station, a couple of cats run the *Wildwood Inn*, and the guinea pigs run the bank.

"Ringo is the main character and he's based on Trixie," said Ellie, who wrote and illustrated the book when she was 16.

The Odessa teen found a publisher for the book about a year later and now is ready to submit a second manuscript.

"I was surprised," said Ellie, now 18. "I didn't expect it to get published so quickly."

Her mother, Theresa Willingham, also was surprised by the quick response from Moo Publishing, the children's imprint of Keene Publishing.

"At first I thought they were just being nice," said Willingham, a freelance writer with her own book on food allergies. "It took me until I was 40 to get published."

Willingham, who freelances for the St. Petersburg Times, said Moo Publishing sent her a letter last year complimenting a column she had written about their family dog, Dexter.

"They sent along a couple of children's books for me to read," she recalled. "And I wrote back saying Ellie had just finished the first draft of *Wildwood*, "would they like to see it?"

The publisher wanted to see it, and from there the process took on a life of its own.

Soon, the telephone calls coming into the Willingham household from Moo Publishing were for Ellie and not her mom.

"They weren't just being nice," said Theresa Willingham, fanning the air with Ellie's first royalty check for \$100.

The editing process, which included numerous electronic communications between Ellie and her editor, took about a year. By the time it was over, Ellie not only had a book to her name, but also a Web site where she has created everything from *Wildwood* T-shirts and posters to calendars and journals.

The site also has information about the various animals in the story as well as games she has created.

Readers can find the Web site at www.wildwoodmine.com

Ellie, who is homeschooled with her sister Andrea, 17, and brother, Chris, 14, is a young woman of few words. But her unrelenting reticence is nowhere evident on the printed page as she draws readers into the quirky world of her imagination.

Writing is not the teen's only talent. She also is a practicing taxidermist. Some of her handiwork, such as a lifelike raccoon and a gray fox, share bedroom space with her very real-life ferret. More of her work is displayed at the nature center at Brooker Creek.

Ellie said her work in taxidermy, and the hunters she has met, helped inspire her second manuscript. It's about a boy who is magically transformed into a deer during hunting season. By the end of the book the boy has a different perspective about the animals he hunts. "I love animals," she said. "I like making them look alive again."