A lineup of Janell Cannon's beloved books at Carlsbad Village Books

The Curious Adventures of Janell Cannon



Janell Cannon harvesting prickly pear (photo by Mabel Wallin).

As "a bat in a bird's world," the author has found family and friendship in Carlsbad's unexpected places.

Written by Wendy Hinman

"We can have four or five careers in our lives," Janell Cannon earnestly says to my high school senior intern. And oh, the careers she has had. All her previous careers have set her up to follow her indefatigable curiosity. Cannon is best known nationally as a children's book author and illustrator. She is known to locals as one of our singular raconteurs, who always appears right before we knew we needed her.

Carlsbad, by hook or by crook

Curiosity is Cannon's driving force. She grew up in Minnesota, a fine state, but what about California? She hit the road right out of high school at 18 to answer this question. Her cross-country adventure conjures up a 1970s soundtrack. "*Trying to make a living and doin' the best I can.*" She cleaned cabins in Yellowstone on her wander over. Then cleaned hotel rooms in Santa Barbara. "*You can sell your paintings on the sidewalk.*"

When she landed in Carlsbad, she was taping cars in an auto body shop while side hustling her paintings and freelancing graphics. She took just enough odd jobs to pay the rent because in Carlsbad, "You can bodysurf every day!" While her blood was still Minnesota thick, she'd even do winter plunges, wondering, "Where is everyone?" There were waves to be had.

As Cannon settled into Carlsbad as home, things began to connect. Her capacities expanded into the community, as she said, "hook by crook." Her paintings were exhibited at the Georgina Cole Library. This was coordinated by Pat Hanson, a patron of the offbeat. This led to her working part time in graphics at the library.

"I was doing all sorts of things," she says. "I did the library's kid newsletter. I learned a lot about desktop publishing." Part time turned to full time turned to overtime. To Cannon, this kind of art began to feel like "a musician that had to write jingles and then goes to the jazz club" on their own time. She had just enough bandwidth to start riffing on bats.

The bat with the butterfly effect

It was the fruit bat that Cannon would paint to unwind from a busy day. She was curious about mammals that could fly. As she studied the skeletal structure and watched the twilight darts and swoops of bats, a particular bat with a particular personality began to emerge. She called her Stellaluna.

As Cannon's late-night reveries took shape, she realized, "Wow, I actually wrote a book!" Now what to do with her new friend? Cannon hit the stacks because she was already in the library. Her deep dive went from flying mammals to how to publish a book. This curiosity led to a simple fact: She needed an agent. She got the name of one with quite a stable of writers: Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston and Lisa See, among others. Most important to Cannon was that Sandra Dijkstra had a train-friendly office in San Diego. But did she do children's books? Cannon went to Kinko's and made color copies. She stuffed "Stellaluna" into a manilla envelope and mailed it off, hoping she could find a future for her.



"Sandy is a hard-boiled, New York-born agent," Cannon says of Dijkstra. "Maybe a week later," after dropping "Stellaluna" into the mailbox next to the Cole, "I had a message from Sandy on my answering machine. She was enthusiastic." Dijkstra went to work and before long "Stellaluna" was perched upside down at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

And from there, in 1993, she took flight. "Stellaluna" was included in the School Library Journal's list of the 100 Best Children's Books of All Time. Raves and awards followed her other books: "Verdi," "Trupp: A Fuzzhead Tale," "Crickwing," "Little Yau: Another Fuzzhead."

Even nerds need a herd

Cannon bought an acre in Carlsbad. "Stellaluna" built a house on it and Cannon rewilded the land. Her orchard is her personal curiosity shop. As an artist, Cannon sees as much going on in the negative spaces as in the natural focal points. From moths and Jerusalem crickets to great horned owls and osprey, Cannon's orchard is ever the teacher. She has a bat detector that grabs the high frequency, ultrasonic calls bats use in echolocation and translates into data humans can absorb. These observations have helped her see the bats that are abundant in her orchard in summer and move in the winter. "There is a lot of bat activity over by the Audubon Visitor Center at Buena Vista Lagoon in the winter."

Though Cannon has found a home, she still wanders within Carlsbad. And what she finds she takes to "the lab." Cannon belongs to "The Nerd Herd," her affectionate name for her like-minded friends who let their specialized curiosity run wild. They all have an ecological, naturalist bent. "We monitor the local watershed and have been recording grunion runs for nine years," Cannon says.

Their bimonthly water quality and microplastics monitoring data can be found on the Preserve Calavera website. Their grunion observations are there, too, and are also sent to scientists at Pepperdine University. Their findings go to other regional scientific research sites depending on the subject matter. The Nerd Herd has noted that sea turtles' egg laying has moved farther north than before. And that the cormorants, the Pacific loon and the common murre have had feeding struggles.

All the herd help with larger projects like water and grunion, but there are specialty nerds. Cannon, of course, is the bat lady. But there are birders and trackers, fish followers and bug buggers. C.S. Lewis observed that friendships and chosen families form around the question, "What, you too?!" This is how the nerds of the herd found each other.

Back to my high school intern. She and Cannon clicked over "What, you too?!" They geeked out over pens, cameras, hidden spaces in Carlsbad, ham radios, scat and skeletons. It's the mutual call of curiosity. It is why Cannon is an honored friend among local Carlsbadians for her curiosity, the wisdom it brings and for the appreciation of simply paying attention.









a) Janell Cannon signing books at Carlsbad Village Books (photo by Jane Wallin). **b)** A bobcat explores Cannon's nocturnal camera. **c)** A pool party in Cannon's orchard. **d)** We see a bumble bee; Cannon sees a neighbor. **e)** Cannon built this bird house commemorating her current curiosity with moths. It was for a fundraiser for the Buena Vista Lagoon Nature Center, a gathering spot for "The Nerd Herd" (photos courtesy of Janell Cannon).