

# LISA MARTIN and VALERIE MARTIN

a conversation between the authors of

## ANTON AND CECIL: CATS AT SEA

**LISA ASKS VALERIE:** What do you see as the overarching theme in *Anton and Cecil: Cats at Sea*? What is it about these cats that you like?

**VALERIE:** *Anton and Cecil* is a quest story, and the theme of such tales is always the same: persistence and courage will get you through. I particularly like that it is a double quest, especially for Cecil, who seeks both adventure for its own sake and the safe return of his brother. That Anton is abducted and Cecil willingly sneaks on board a second ship strikes me as an ancient motif: going into the unknown to bring back a lost loved one. What I like most is that our cats aren't orphans and that they love their home and their life before they go to sea.

**LISA:** Why cats?

**VALERIE:** Good question. I'm a dog person myself, I like to be worshipped, but I've had many cats, and at the time we began this book, I had a most wonderful gray cat named Jack who was just the smartest and coolest animal I've ever known. You had two cats, so cats seemed a natural choice. My Jack, who died while we were writing, was a neat, serious, observant, endlessly patient fellow, picky about food, and cautious about things like cars and strangers. He was my model for Anton. The big difference was that Jack was a mighty murderer of little animals and birds and wouldn't have stopped to listen to a brave little mouse, the last in his line.

**LISA:** You've written many adult novels as a solo author, how was the transition to collaboration with a coauthor?

**VALERIE:** I didn't expect the transition to be so easy or so much fun. Writing is a very lonely business, and I'm accustomed to being alone with my characters until the story is done. I loved being able to talk about the cats, working out the details of the plot, going over the sections you wrote and reading your comments on the ones I wrote, sometimes shouting with laughter on Skype as we did the revisions, and especially the long summer session we had sitting on the porch in North Carolina just reading the first draft out loud to each other.



Photo Credit: John Cullen

Orange Prize winner **VALERIE MARTIN** is the author of many acclaimed adult novels, including *Property* and *The Confessions of Edward Day*. She lives in Millbrook, New York. Her niece, **LISA MARTIN**, has worked as an educator and children's poet and currently resides in Charlottesville, Virginia. This is their first book for young readers.

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—Valerie Martin

**VALERIE ASKS LISA:** And how about you, Lisa? When we agreed that we would coauthor a children's book, how did you imagine the division of labor would work, and how was it, ultimately, different from what you imagined?

**LISA:** I knew from the beginning that we were equally committed to the project, and so I expected we'd each do roughly half of the work, but I imagined that we would write the chapters together, sort of meshing the scenes as we went. In retrospect, that would have been slow and awkward, so when the cats separated and we wrote alternating chapters, each following a different cat, it was quite easy. We critiqued each other's work, suggested changes, and brainstormed ideas when one of us got stuck. I remember feeling terribly nervous sending you the early chapters, worried that you'd hate my style, but you were always unbelievably generous and encouraging. I guess I imagined I'd be the very junior partner, but you treated me as an equal, and we laughed and were complimentary to each other throughout. Someone once asked if we argued, but we never did.

**LISA ASKS VALERIE:** Your father was a ship captain. What memories of his experiences did you use in writing *Anton and Cecil*?

**VALERIE:** My father had as little to do with sailing ships as possible. He was the captain of giant steamers the size of city blocks, and one thing I know he never had on board was a cat. He was a dog person, actually. However, I did spend a lot of time thinking about him out there on the sea, and I grew up watching my mother flip through a huge atlas that I still have, trying to figure out where he was. He also told me some stories about life at sea, about bad storms as well as a particularly harrowing tale about a fire that broke out in the hold of his ship in the middle of the ocean.

**VALERIE ASKS LISA:** Once the cats got on the ships, our chapters were largely written separately, with you following Cecil. Is Cecil modeled on any animal or person you know, or is he just you as a cat?

**LISA:** Cecil is actually much more adventurous than I am, so he was both fun and tricky to write. My normal reaction to new situations is caution, and I'm a worrier. If I have had something great in a restaurant, I'll order it again the next time. Not Cecil, he'll try anything (especially food) and is always wondering what's out there. Everything looks like fun to him, even if it's dangerous. I'm more of a homebody, like Anton, and I envision you as more of the adventurer type!

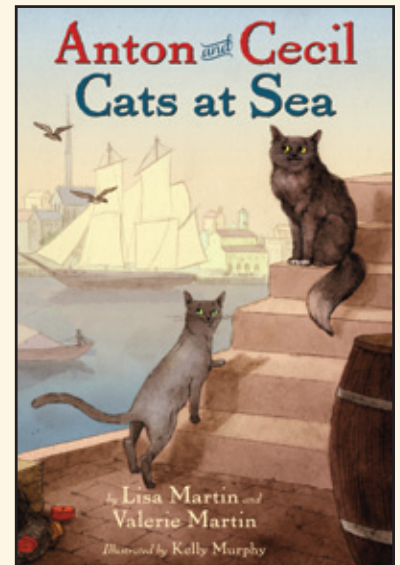
**VALERIE:** You did a lot of the research, so that our cats' adventures could actually have taken place in the real world of nineteenth century shipping. What was the hardest part of that? Did you discover anything amazing that you didn't know about before?

**LISA:** The research turned out to be one of the most interesting parts about writing this book. We picked Lunenburg because it was mostly surrounded by ocean, and it turned out to be a tremendous hub for international shipping routes as well as a major shipbuilding region in the nineteenth century. Most fascinating to me was learning about the lives of the sailors, how courageous and skilled they were at guiding these huge and complicated vessels through thousands of miles of open water, and how much they trusted and believed in the strength and, in a way, the soul of their ship. That's what draws Cecil, too, ships represent the means to get out and discover the exciting unknown, and he loves that about them.

**LISA ASKS VALERIE:** So Anton and Cecil have gone to sea and discovered a whole wide world beyond their imaginations. What happens when they return home?

**VALERIE:** When they come back they're different, yet they will find the place they left the same. I think for many a traveler that's the beginning of a lifetime of going out and coming back, each time more unsettled by the sameness of home. I suspect that before too long these cats will be out in the wider world again.

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