



AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE YLVISAKER Author of *Little Klein*

This spirited novel for young readers features a cast of colorful characters in a rural river town circa 1949, where boys wrestle and fish, swipe pies, brave perilous waters on homemade rafts—and sometimes quietly become heroes.

Q. How did you become a writer?

A. I think I've been a writer since my mom put a notebook in my suitcase when I was six and said I had to keep a travel journal. I have written compulsively ever since — letters, stories, and poems. I even love writing lists. I was a teacher for many years, which led to writing nonfiction books for children on topics such as oceans and natural disasters.

As for fiction, just as LeRoy gets the urge to add a family to his life in *Little Klein*, I am always getting the urge to add a story to my life.

Q. What inspired you to write *Little Klein*?

A. Finding Little Klein's story was more like following a series of hunches than having a lightning bolt of inspiration.

My uncle Don was called "Little Ylvisaker" when he was growing up in the 1940s. I loved that moniker and the idea of his childhood smallness. He told me about a family of neighborhood troublemakers called the Klein boys. In one incident the Klein boys pushed Little Ylvisaker off a raft into a pond.

There was also a boy in my novel *Dear Papa* named LeRoy, whom I'd been trying to write into his own story. I imagined those Klein boys picking on him the way they had picked on my uncle.

In addition, I had a photograph of my dad as a boy standing next to a very homely homemade doghouse, and that led me to follow a story thread as well.



Then a friend e-mailed me and said, "Send me a three-sentence cliff-hanger, and I'll write the next three sentences." I wrote about the Klein boys tearing down LeRoy's doghouse and using the boards to build a raft. Because of my poorly written sentences, my friend thought LeRoy was a dog, and in his sentences, LeRoy barked. I was confused at first, but then it clicked: LeRoy *was* a dog, and the youngest of the Klein boys was the main character.

Q. Did you grow up with siblings? Did you draw on that experience for this book?

A. I am the middle child of three kids, and ironically I was the biggest when we were growing up, taller even than my sister who was two years older than me. I think groups of siblings do develop their own little world of hierarchy and shifting alliances. We were a unit, just as the Klein boys are a unit. We'd get a little too wild and be sent out to play. Also, there was a family of boys on our block. They were much more physical with each other, and I drew on them for the Klein brothers' rough-and-tumble natures.

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Little Klein BY ANNE YLVISAKER



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Q. What would you like readers (young or old) to take away from *Little Klein*?

A. Most people have had the experience of feeling small or invisible in some way in their lives. I hope readers will feel a sense of shared triumph with Harold Klein. Most of all, I hope they feel satisfied when they close the book.

Q. You have a master's degree in education. Do you find that background helpful in writing for children?

A. I do draw quite a bit on my years in the classroom when I write, whether consciously or not. A classroom becomes a little society, with all the diverse personalities interacting so intensely every day. While writing *Little Klein*, I thought about a boy I'd had in class who was by far the smallest student in his grade. He talked in such a thin voice that everyone leaned toward him when he spoke. Yet clearly he was not small in his own mind. He aspired to be a professional football player. He'd wear big Vikings jerseys and draw pictures of football players. He organized daily football games at recess, anointing himself quarterback. Remembering that student gave me the idea of Little Klein's thinking about all of his possible futures.

Q. You grew up in Minneapolis, and as an adult you've lived in St. Paul and now Cedar Rapids. How has living in the Midwest influenced your writing?

A. The rhythms of life in the Midwest are ingrained in me, so I suppose that shows up in my writing. The seasons affect our activities and interactions a great deal. A camaraderie blooms every spring when people come out of their houses, start working in their yards, begin walking places instead of driving. In the library scene, Cornelia Clambush has this instinct, wanting to gather everyone together to go help Mother Klein with her garden.

Though I grew up in the city, my neighborhood functioned like a small town. The parents were neighborhood parents, looking out for everyone's kids. We couldn't get away with something just because we weren't at home, much like when Widow Flom sees Little Klein and knows that something's up because he is out by himself.

I love the quiet beauty of the Midwest. We may not have the drama of mountains or oceans, but there is a sustained gracefulness to the winding rivers, the forests and prairies. One of the most enjoyable periods of writing *Little Klein* was when I spent a spring week at the Anderson Center in Red Wing, Minnesota, which is situated along the Cannon and Mississippi Rivers. I could just imagine the Klein boys running down those river paths.

Q. What were your favorite books when you were a child?

A. We spent a lot of time at the Roosevelt branch of the Minneapolis Public Library, where Lucy the librarian kept me in books. I wish I could remember more of what I read, but a few titles do stand out. A couple of picture books that I read over and over were *Pickle-Chiffon Pie* by Jolly Roger Bradfield and a book called *Emmet's Pig* by Mary Stolz. *Harriet the Spy* was a favorite, as well as *The Trumpet of the Swan* by E. B. White. And I remember the enormous thrill of discovering *A Wrinkle in Time*.



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