Q&A with Natalie Labarre

How did you learn about all of these incredible jobs?

Some came from research, but most I've had in my back pocket due to my very real obsession with unusual ways in which people can make a living. I blame my family's own odd job history for sparking the interest. One of my favorite stories is from when my father was a teen. For a summer, he romped around France with a group of wrestlers who would go from town to town and set up in the parking lot of grocery stores that needed help with promotion. Papa's job was to put together and take apart the wrestling ring. Is there a job title for that? 😂

How many of these unique jobs have you held?

Personally, not any from the book (yet), but I've had a few strange ones. I sold dolls at American Girl for a year. I sang with a professional choir until I was eighteen; we performed for the pope at Yankee Stadium once and toured Japan for a summer. My father's a building superintendent, and sometimes, when he was out of town, my sisters and I would cover for him, taking out trash and "disappearing" rats.

When you were creating the book, which came first, the words or the illustrations?

The words came first for sure. Even in my work as an animator, the very first thing I do when starting a project is research research research! I get inspired by collecting as much information as I can, because specific details based in reality are so much cooler and stranger than what I could make up in my head. That's probably why I love nonfiction!

Are Nautical Cowboy and Chicken Sexer truly existing job titles?

Nautical Cowboy may be the name of a restaurant in Atascadero, California, but it is *also* a real job title! I've seen it called *seacowboy* and *seagoing cowboy*—that's the preferred term of the nonprofit organization Heifer International, which used to hire seagoing cowboys to ship cattle to countries in need of sustainable food sources.

Chicken sexing is *very* real (and worth a Google search)! I know this because when my sister Camille was twelve, she decided this would be her career after learning how much money you could make giving adorable baby chicks a squeeze. (That's not what she does now. ☺)

I think this book will be helpful (and funny) for little ones who aren't sure what they want to be when they grow up. Was this your hope as you created the book?

Yes, very much so! I remember being very stressed out as a kid anytime someone asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. Becoming a doctor/lawyer/teacher/plumber is great, but I was looking for something a little more weird . . . until the day I watched a behind-the-scenes clip from Pixar's *Toy Story*. I couldn't *believe* that people were paid to draw and play and tell stories all day. And now that's what I do! I make funny faces in a mirror at my desk for expression reference, and I think that counts as pretty strange.

Which of these jobs do you find the most incredible? Which ones were the most fun to illustrate?

Most incredible: chief sniffer at NASA. This is a colloquialism; the official job title is chemical specialist, but even NASA's current sniffer, George Aldrich, admits the nickname is more fun. What a job, though. The science of it is fascinating, and I think it's so beautiful that George has been at it for forty-five years, sniffing away! I would love to meet him one day.

Most fun to illustrate: *So* hard to choose, but I'll say . . . the line sitter. Drawing characters will always be my favorite!

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