

Sally Hill Mills learned to write children's books with children, as a creative writing teacher in elementary schools. She learned what keeps children interested in a story (relatable characters, obstacles, action) and how laughter can season a story so that big ideas can be digested.

Her first book, Jimmy: Toughest Dog Ever, grew out of Mills' experience as a special education teacher. She saw that kids who left the room for "special" classes or who had visible disabilities feared being labeled and not fully belonging to the larger group. The book takes on bullying head on, as Jimmy's big brother, Arrow, struggles with how others will perceive his little brother with the gimpy right leg. When Mills' real three-legged dog was bitten by a rattlesnake and lost his eye, she saw the opportunity to turn his experience into an exploration of differentness and inclusion, advocacy and empathy with a character all children can relate to: a little dog who wants a home, a family, and the freedom to play with others. Kirkus calls the book, "a rich reading experience for elementary school children" and "a great classroom book full of lessons about language and life."

The book's success with children led to more writing workshops in elementary school classrooms around Albuquerque after Mills' retirement. Then the real-life Arrow died. While mourning, Mills realized that, as hard as it would be, her dog's death offered an opportunity to take the character Jimmy on another, even more difficult journey: through grief, solitude and loss into recovery, reconnection and a broadened outlook on life. Mills drew upon her own experiences as a child to write the book.

"When I was thirteen, my grandmother and best friend died unexpectedly. I entered a strange new world, one where I didn't recognize myself. A therapist later helped me understand that I probably went through some kind of childhood depression. It was this experience that I wished to help a child navigate. It's likely my brother and sister were experiencing something similar at the same time, but without a language that could connect us, we might as well have been living in different countries. I wrote Jimmy: Toughest Times Ever to give children who are grieving a story, images, and language that could connect them to others in a dark time."

Mills spoke with a children's grief counselor before writing the book. The counselor encouraged her to write, explaining that books are useful when children are grieving because they can be alone with a book. She explored the treatment of death in other cultures, such as Japan, where death is sometimes described as a "change of world." She searched for timeless themes that everyone can understand, such as the natural changes in a day or a year, or the transformation of animals in life cycles. She drew on thirty years of reading in philosophy and religion to introduce ideas such as qualities that transcend death and the allowance of an extraordinary experience, always writing in a way that anyone, from any religious tradition (or none at all), can relate to.

Kirkus calls Jimmy: Toughest Times Ever "a touching sequel targeting a wider range of readers" and says, "its graceful treatment of love and loss will resonate with many adults, too.... A lovely, resonant, child-appropriate tale about loss and the cycle of grief and healing."