



Sally Hill Mills

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 gimp 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.

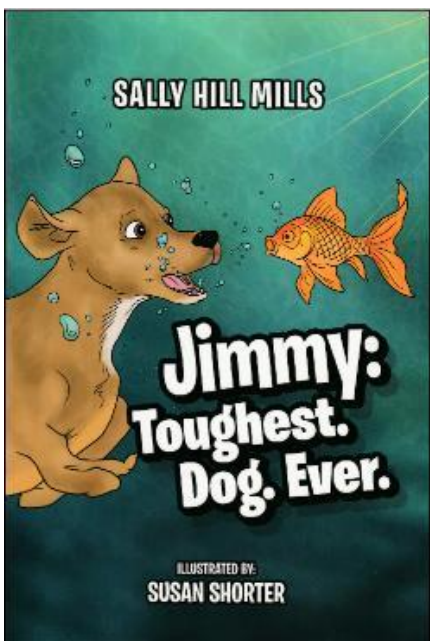
"When I was thirteen, my grandmother and best friend died unexpectedly. I entered a strange new world, one where I didn't recognize myself. A therapist later helped me understand that I probably went through some kind of childhood depression. It was this experience that I wished to help a child navigate. 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.”





It's hard being a runt. Harder still if you're missing one of your legs. Makes you pretty sure no family would adopt you. None of the other dogs in the shelter even wants to play with you. Makes you just want to put your head down, close your eyes, and give up. But Jimmy will find out that he can belong to a family and a pack of dogs and that even though life is really hard sometimes, life is good. Don't ever give up.

JIMMY:

Toughest Times Ever



It's tough when you lose your friend. It's tougher still when you feel like a newcomer is trying to push his memory right out of the house. But a heart can hold so much more than a little dog could imagine.

*The Real Story behind
Jimmy: Toughest. Dog. Ever.*



A real dog named Djembe inspired Jimmy's story. In the story, Lola and Stan found the little dog on a website. In real life, my daughter Robin and her friend Amy found Djembe on the Lap Dog Rescue website. Robin talked me into taking a chance on a type of dog I never would have dreamed of adopting. He snuggled his way into my heart just as Jimmy snuggles his way in between Stan and Lola on the couch. I named him Djembe after an African drum that is played with a lot of bounce. Djembe has a lot of bounce in him.



There is also a real Stan, a real Arrow, two big dogs at the park who became Djembe's friends, and a very real rattlesnake. Djembe was bitten in the spring, when rattlesnakes wake up from hibernation. Their poison is stronger at that time of year. A young rattlesnake is more dangerous than an old one, because young rattlesnakes cannot control how much poison they release when they bite. The vet thought a young snake bit Djembe.



Just like in the story, Djembe ran away after he was bitten. If he had stayed still, the poison would not have spread so quickly through his body. In the hospital, he was given medicine to fight the poison, medicine to slow his swelling, and medicine to ease his pain. The medicine went straight into his veins through an IV (intravenous) line.



Jimmy needed fresh blood to fight the snake's poison, so he was given three blood transfusions. The blood came from healthy dogs. Just as people donate their blood for others who need it, so do dogs. The vet hospital that treated Djembe says every month 6 to 8 pet owners bring their dogs in to donate blood. I was grateful to those owners and pets for providing blood when Djembe needed it.



The rattlesnake bit Djembe just below his right eye. Its poison destroyed the eye, which is why the veterinarians had to take it out. At first, Djembe seemed confused by having only one eye. He sometimes bumped into people or didn't see other dogs running to him. But now he gets around as easily as he ever did. He runs, chases and wrestles with other dogs just like he did before. Like an African drummer, he never misses a beat – I guess Djembe was the right name for him!