

Roland Smith (1951–)

By Lynette Gottlieb

Author and former zookeeper Roland Smith said it was the gift of a typewriter from his parents when he was five years old that sparked his love of writing. He has described himself as a writer of "adventure, animals, and more," and his many books have children and teens at the center of the excitement. Smith writes about characters who face high-stakes situations with daring and courage, often working together to achieve an outcome. His prize-winning publications include both fiction and nonfiction, totaling about 50 titles. The most acclaimed are the *Peak* and I.Q. series.

Roland Smith was born in Portland on November 30, 1951, to Roland Charles (Smitty) Smith and Melva May (Hap) Smith. He attended Grant and Lincoln High Schools in Portland and received a GED diploma when he was sixteen. Originally an English major at Portland State University, he switched to biology when he took a job at the Portland Zoo (now the Oregon Zoo), where he found that he loved working with animals. He left PSU to work at the zoo fulltime. For more than twenty years, he conducted research and traveled for the zoo as zookeeper, senior zookeeper, curator of mammals and birds, general curator, assistant zoo director, and zoo director. As a senior research biologist, he helped conservation biologists reintroduce red wolves into the wild.

Smith wrote while he was working as a biologist, rising at four in the morning before starting his day job. Eventually, however, he made the segue to become a children's writer with his first book, *Sea Otter Rescue* (1990), an outgrowth of his involvement cleaning up the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. Since then, Smith has written several popular and critically acclaimed series whose first volumes include *Beneath*, *Mutation*, *Cryptid Hunters*, *I.Q.: Independence Hall*, *Zach's Lie*, *Jack's Run*, *Thunder Cave*, *Storm Runners*, and *The Edge*. Nonseries titles have included *The Captain's Dog: My Journey with the Lewis and Clark Tribe*, *Sasquatch*, *Legwork*, and *Elephant Run*, which won the Oregon Council of Teachers of English Oregon Spirit Book Award for Young Adults in 2007.

Smith's writing style is sprinkled with wry humor that hooks the reader and action that takes them for a ride. The topics of his books range from biology, cryptozoology, meteorology, volcanology, and American history to organized crime, mountaineering, terrorism, technology, anthropology, and football. He introduces readers to such places as Burma, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and Brazil as well as American cities such as New York City, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

Smith has received many writing awards, including the American Library Association's 2008 Best Books for Young Adults, Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, and Selected Audio Books for Young Adults for *Peak*. *Sasquatch* received an ALA Top 10 Quick Picks for Young Adult Reluctant Readers in 1999. He received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Children's Book Award for *The Captain's Dog* (1999) and won the Oregon Book Award for Young Readers for *Journey of the Red Wolf* (1996).

Smith and his wife Marie Smith have co-authored several books in the alphabet series, including *B is for Beaver: An Oregon Alphabet*, *E is for Evergreen: A Washington Alphabet*, *N is for our Nation's Capital*, and *W is for Waves*. Until the fall of 2021, they lived on a farm south of Portland. They live in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Sources

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