

Writing Climate Fiction for Kids (and adults too!)

by Bruce Smith



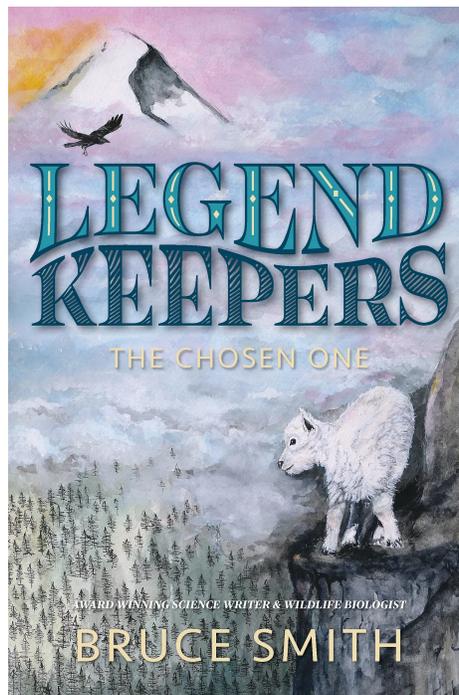
Climate Fiction Writers League

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“Why change?” a friend asked when I told him. “You’re good at writing adult science and natural history books. Why start writing children’s books?”

I asked myself that same question before deciding to write [Legend Keepers](#), my middle-grade novel series.



I hadn’t planned to change course, to switch from writing nonfiction books about wildlife and wildland conservation. Instead, while on tour for my nonfiction book, [Life on the Rocks: A Portrait of the American Mountain Goat](#), I was dismayed that few children attended my speaking events. I wanted *them* to know about this magnificent animal and where it lived. But their parents and grandparents didn’t bring them, even though event

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My goal was to nourish the aspirations and activism of young people, themed around the climate crisis. I hoped to fashion the chapter in *Life on the Rocks*, that explains effects of global warming on alpine biota, into a story that would engage young readers. Besides, I enjoy a good challenge. With no experience writing KidLit or fiction, could I pull this off?

The story began to materialize with the main character, a newborn mountain goat. I have a special fondness for mountain goats, having spent two years living among them deep in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area of western Montana. I was conducting research then for a graduate degree on their ecology, but my fascination endured. I've continued to climb to their homes to watch and photograph these alpine athletes for nearly fifty years.

Moreover, the mountain goat serves as a perfect gateway species for the climate issue. It inhabits higher elevations than any other large mammal in North America. And it's at the highest altitudes, and highest latitudes, that the planet is warming fastest. Species living in those places must adapt to their warming environment fast, if they can.

Children depend mightily on animals for comfort, inspiration, imagination, and art. Early in childhood, parents and teachers read children stories about all sorts of animals to teach them about the world and their feelings. As Lydia Millet noted in a *New York Times* essay titled the "Children's Menagerie," "We subconsciously believe that to learn how to be human—which we have many years to do, for human beings have longer

childhoods than any other species, a feature that is one of our species' distinguishing characteristics—children must be surrounded by animal imagery.”

We all know this intuitively. Animal imagery fills most every child's nursery. Stories of animals are often the first a child is read. As they grow into childhood, animal characters serve as trusted teachers.

Storytelling dates back as far as human history, ethnologists tell us. It's vital for passing down information, group bonding, entertainment, cultural identity, and survival. In my nonfiction works, I used storytelling to translate science for lay readerships. Fiction empowers us to expand the readers' experience. Writing children's novels about environmental topics of importance to me was a way to reach a broader audience.



I chose to write for a middle-grade readership. Eight to twelve-year-olds seems the sweet spot for the stories I want to tell. Those kids are learning about science and the concepts I want to write about. They're information sponges. And before the teen years strike, most middle graders remain captivated by animals and nature.

As a scientist, getting the biological and environmental underpinnings of the story right is important to me. To subtly deliver the story's underlying climate theme, without being preachy, I wrapped it in a grand adventure at the roof of the world. Throughout I wove the environmental message through the actions, dialogue, thoughts—the very

lives—of mountain goats and other animal characters that live out-of-sight, out-of-mind.

Who better to reveal the climate crisis than the animals that experience its impacts daily? As author John Yunker noted in [Writing for Animals](#), “The more we study animals, the smarter they get.” As indigenous people have done for millennia, by paying close attention we can learn much from nature.

Of course, *Legend Keepers* is a blend of fact and fiction. Can we really know whether animals communicate with other species? Do they have their own stories and legends? Here the novelist’s imagination and creativity take over.

The series’ first book, [The Chosen One](#), had only animal characters, featuring Buddy, an orphaned mountain goat with a weighty destiny to save her mom’s band of goats from a great peril (the Great Warming) foretold in an ancient legend. Because the nonhuman animals lacked knowledge about the depth and cause of the climate problem, I introduced human characters in the sequel, *The Partnership*. I wanted to explore more deeply and directly the climate crisis through characters in which kids might see themselves.

In *The Partnership*, due out August 30, 2022, twelve-year-old Garson Strangewalker doesn’t fit in at school. He’s in a new community, hasn’t made friends, and his father has gone missing while fighting in Afghanistan. Each day’s a struggle until a simple question he asks at the spring science fair sparks an interest in glaciers. He reads about them but can’t get enough.

For his sixth-grade science project he climbs to the Shining Mountain Glacier in the wilderness not far from his home. A chance encounter with Buddy, a remarkable kid mountain goat, changes everything as these two kids’ lives become entwined. Their shared alarm over the Great Warming’s threat to the glacier, and to Buddy’s mountaintop home, transforms an insecure boy into an ardent environmental advocate. Sometimes it takes a partnership to bring out the best in us.

In this excerpt, Garson tells his mom what he’s learned, and more importantly, how he feels about the melting of glaciers.

“There are glaciers on every continent, except Australia. Most of them have been

around for hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of years. And you know what else?”

Mrs. Strangewalker’s fork and knife hovered over her plate. Her son’s enthusiasm was infectious. “What else?”

“The ice in glaciers is so thick and heavy it actually moves—like something living. Not that people can actually see them crawling,” Garson poked some peas across his plate. “Scientists learned it by studying them for years.”

Garson paused and examined his mom. “Don’t you think it’s awful?”

“Think what’s awful?”

“Something so big and old could actually disappear?”

She laid her silverware down. Elbows on the table, hands folded beneath her chin, she eyed him intently. *I haven’t seen this much passion in him since we took the training wheels off his bike.*

Not waiting for an answer, Garson continued, “This one scientist in Montana has studied the ones in Glacier National Park since 1991. Guess what he thinks?”

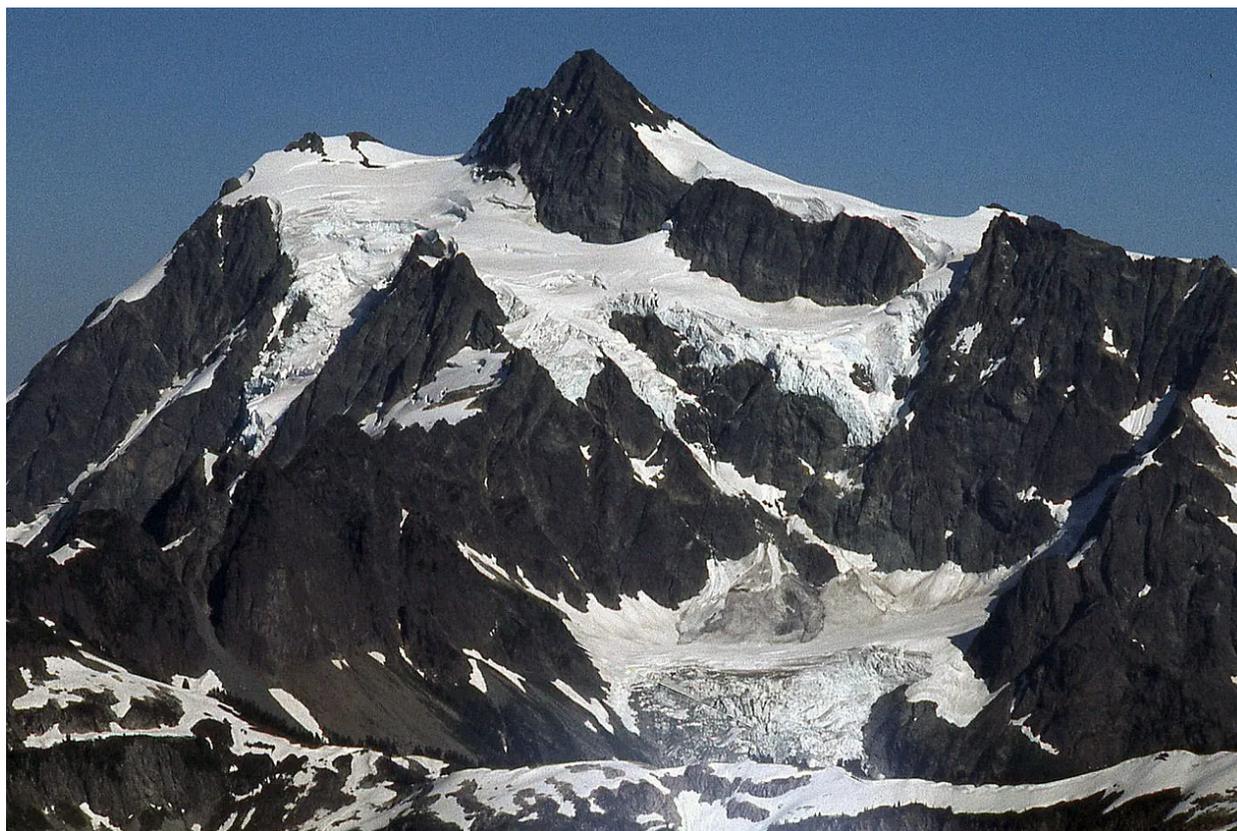
“I don’t know.”

“He thinks the park’s glaciers might be gone by 2030. All of them *gone* in a few years!”

From his library and internet research, Garson learns that there are 198,000 glaciers, covering about one-half percent of Earth’s land surface (excluding the massive Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets). To Garson, these are more than icy statistics. To him, it’s almost like glaciers are alive. And because this is how he thinks of them, their melting and inevitable disappearance are all the more distressing. He feels empathy, much as other kids may mourn the potential loss of polar bears, pandas, or penguins.

From his efforts to learn about the Shining Mountain Glacier near where he lives, he discovers that saving glaciers can save so much more. What he learns talking to Buddy (her special gift) changes everything for him. *Not just the glacier is in trouble, but mountain goats and the other animals and plants that live there are too.* All are cold adapted; and

glaciers and permanent snow are essential components of their habitat, their very existence.



The retreat of ancient ice further alters our planet's climate, the oceans, entire ecosystems. Mountain glaciers are telltale canaries in the coal mine. Satellite imagery and time-lapse photography enable us to watch them shrink and disappear before our very eyes. According to a World Wildlife Fund study, more than a third of the world's remaining glaciers will melt before 2100, even if humans curb emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.

For our species too, the loss of the world's continental glaciers and snowfields will create growing hardship and misery. The US Geological Survey reports that higher elevations of the Northern Rocky Mountains, where I live, have experienced three times the global average temperature rise over the past century. In concert, snowpack has diminished and the remaining glaciers are in retreat. Meltwaters of these frozen reservoirs provide up to 85 percent of the water humans depend on for domestic, municipal, and agricultural uses as well as a host of other ecosystem services.

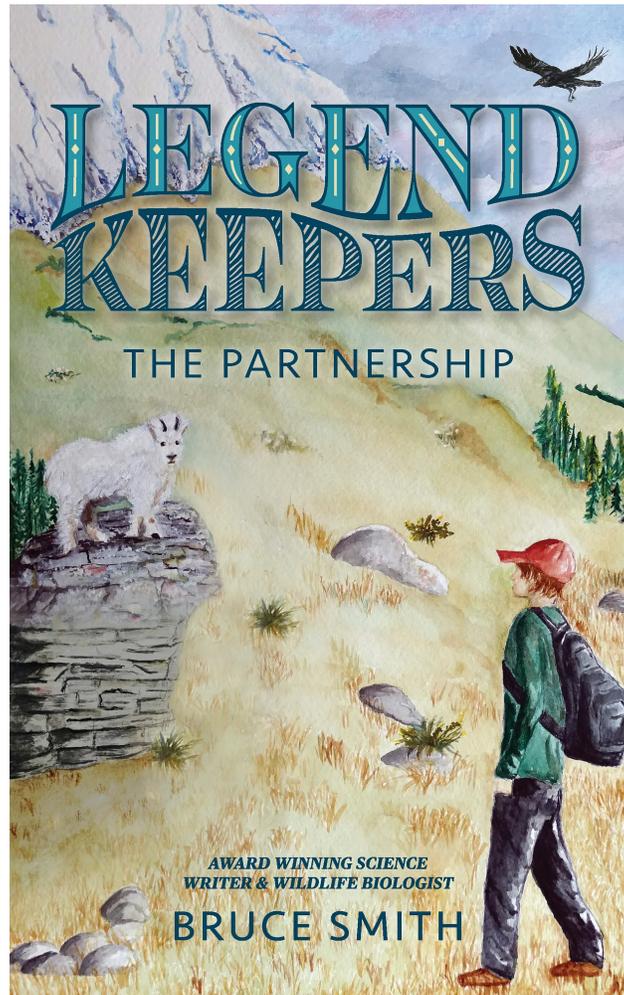
“Climate change is one of the most profound inequities of the modern era,” writes *New*

York Times global climate correspondent Somini Sengupta. “Those who did not cause most of the problem are feeling most of the impact already.”

Today’s kids are among the most at risk. A September 2021 article in *Science* forecasts that today’s average six-year -old is likely to live through three times as many climate disasters as their grandparents have. Our failure to address the climate crisis is like passing on a burgeoning debt to our heirs—our children, grandchildren, and their grandchildren. The debt collector is lurking. Not that we aren’t already experiencing the consequences of our past conduct and obduracy. It’s just that the worst lies ahead. This is becoming scarier and more stressful for kids.

Why change, indeed? Because writing climate fiction for kids can provide hope and expand their awareness and connection to the world around them. At best, writers may help kindle more active citizenship and environmental activism in movements like Fridays for Future. And who knows? By nourishing and inspiring young readers, perhaps they’ll educate their parents and others.

Legend Keepers: The Partnership is a perfect classroom book for STEM learning.



*Bruce Smith is a wildlife biologist who holds a PhD degree in Zoology. During his career with the federal government, he studied and managed most large mammal species that roam the western United States. He's authored five nonfiction books of natural history, conservation, and outdoor adventure. Among them is *Life on the Rocks: A Portrait of the Mountain Goat*, which won the National Outdoor Book Award.*

*In *Legend Keepers*, his first novel, he draws upon his experiences and fascination with wild animals to capture the imaginations of young readers and immerse them in the natural world. Bruce and his wife Diana live in southwest Montana not far from mountain goats. Visit him at [www.bruce-smith.com](#)*



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Your story inspired me! What's happening with glaciers across the planet clearly

demonstrates the existential crisis we are in... and your story makes this accessible to young readers in a way that may inspire them towards making their own response.

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Solutions Spotlight

Love it! Part of my mission as well. Great job in this article too!

In this issue's extract from a book featuring a climate solution, Midge Raymond shares an extract from [My Last Continent](#). In this scene, penguin researchers (and tour guides) Deb and Keller are working together in Antarctica; their study of penguins will help determine what is affecting them the most (climate change, fishing, tourism) and what actions humans can take to help save them.

In the morning, we rise early; it's a balmy forty degrees, and we work in light jackets, forgoing hats and gloves. Our tasks for the next two weeks include counting birds, eggs, and chicks, as well as weighing a sampling of chicks to contribute to one of our ongoing studies on the

connections between penguin populations and fast-paced climate change. For 1 season, the