

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Author Samantha Childs

Henri and the Magnificent Snort

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1. **Title/ Position:** Writer Author

2. **Age:** 43

3. **Pronouns:** she/her

4. **Where do you live:** Solana Beach, California

5. **Education:**

BA in Literature from Claremont McKenna College

Studied Shakespeare at St. Catherine's College, Oxford University (Junior Year Abroad)

JD from UCLA School of Law

MFA in Nonfiction Writing from Columbia University

6. **Tell us about *Henri and the Magnificent Snort* (What is the book's plot? Who are the book's characters? When did you first begin working on the book? How long did it take to execute?)**

Henri and the Magnificent Snort is about a French bulldog, Henri, who moves from New York City to California and is bullied because he snorts. He is launched on an adventure to learn more about himself and the world, and to discover how lovable he truly is - snorts and all!

The main character, Henri, is my former French bulldog. He was and still is famous – his Instagram has 67K followers (@henrilefrenchie), he's been in the Huffington Post (dressed as a turtle), he was a DogTV star, and was the cover article of Pet Companion Magazine.

The story of *Henri and the Magnificent Snort* is based on two true stories. It is based on the real-life story of Henri as he moves from New York City to California. And it is based on my own real-life experiences with being bullied in childhood when I moved to a new school. I tell my story through the lens of Henri.

Along with Henri, almost all of the dogs within the book are painted from dogs in real life. They are the dogs of family and friends, as well as Instagram dogs who I became friends with from all around the world.

I first came up with the idea and began working on the book with my illustrator, Hannah Farr, in 2015. We worked on it together for 8 years and it has just launched!

7. **What was the inspiration for the story?**

Henri and the Magnificent Snort is based on a mixture of two true stories. The first is the story of Henri: his personality and unique characteristics as well as his life in San Diego and New York City. The second story is my own personal story from childhood and my experiences with being bullied. I was bullied when I entered a new school for middle school. Like Henri in the book, I was called names, chanted at, cut off by my old friends, and felt so alone. For me, it lasted a year and half, and then I transferred out of the school. And like Henri in book, after all I'd been through, I was shocked in the future when people wanted to be my friend. For so long I believed that something must be wrong with me for people to have treated me that way. In the book, I tell the story of what happened to me and how I felt through Henri and his experiences with the other dogs.

8. **Why did you want to address the topic of bullying?**

Bullying and kindness are such interesting and important and consistently relevant topics. Through the lens of a bullied French bulldog and this book, I wanted to explore the beauty of our differences, how we all belong, and how we are all lovable. I think that these ideas are so important for both how we view and treat other people and also for how we view and treat ourselves. Bullying can take so many forms throughout our lives, both as children and adults, and both externally and internally within our own minds. The way we talk to ourselves is so important. That can be another form of bullying. Treating ourselves and others with love is the answer.

My yoga teacher has read a two-page passage (pages 40-41) from the book out loud in a few of her classes, which I find so touching. (It's a passage that addresses why we shouldn't be bullied.) I've been in one of the classes when she read it, and I loved that it was a room full of adults laying on their mats and listening to a reading of children's book. (My children's book, eek!) It felt surreal and beautiful and raw to experience.

Here are the words she read:

"Our differences are special. They're our gifts to be shared.
They shouldn't be shameful or a reason to be scared.
Of everything you could be and everything you do,
The greatest thing of all, Henri, is simply to be you.
Not only are we all unique, we're also all connected.
Therefore, it makes no sense that you could ever be rejected.
Everything and everyone, including you and I,
Are made up of the magic from the stars in the sky.
No one is less than, no one is more,
We are all exactly the same at the core."

9. Why did you choose the form of a children's book to address bullying?

There is something very powerful about children's books. When you grow up with a book, the story becomes a part of you and how you view the world. I want this story to reach children and to help them. The book's messages are ones that I needed to hear when I was young and being bullied. They are messages I need to hear today. I still love reading children's books now, as an adult too. There is magic and depth in the form. Children's books can portray a message so quickly, and in a way that sticks in your mind.

I also loved the idea of portraying the issue of bullying using dogs as the characters, because dogs are so clearly lovable and innocent. No one would think that a dog deserved to be bullied. And dogs are also so different from another, in shape, size, color, personality, etc. But they are all dogs. And all lovable. They can be beautiful mirrors for humans. I've learned so much from animals. And a children's book is the perfect form for playing with those ideas and expressing that.

10. What was your creative process for writing this book?

I wrote the story first, shaping it largely with using the playfulness of rhyme. As soon as I had the bones of the story, I began working with Hannah Farr, my illustrator, on the ideas for the pictures. We would go back and forth with me giving her the idea and doing extremely rough and funny sketches, her drawing up beautiful sketches, tweaking things, then painting, and then more tweaks. She was beyond wonderful as an illustrator. And so patient as I kept adding more and more dogs to the book. Then there was a long period of editing and adjusting of both the words and the images as well as the layout and making it all fit together into a cohesive and seamless final product. It was a much bigger task than I originally envisioned. I initially thought it

would take me a year, which makes me laugh at my younger self. But I had a lot of fun along the way and seeing the final product and hearing people's responses to it is so rewarding. When people share how the book made them feel love and joy or that they both cried and laughed reading it, it makes me feel so emotional and my heart feels like it has been hugged. It is beautiful how a little creation you made at home can go out into the world and touch people.

11. In the book, Henri is bullied for his snort when he moves to a new place. What were your thoughts as you were working through how you wanted to resolve this instance of bullying within the book?

I thought a lot about how I wanted to resolve this instance of bullying in the book, and to be honest, I stressed over it a bit. At one point I read lots of books about bullying, most with conflicting advice of what a child should do when bullied. I was trying to ascertain what I should do in the book with the bully and with Henri. While the book is fiction, it mirrors very closely my experiences with bullying, and so it felt very personal to me. I didn't want to do anything that betrayed the thirteen-year-old me who went through it. When I was bullied, which lasted about a year and a half, I ended up leaving my school. But this story needed more closure. Henri confronting the bully didn't feel authentic to me, nor did them becoming friends. I chose to have Henri stand up against bullying with a rally and to spread his messages of compassion and love to the other dogs. It was a way for Henri to do something that turned his past pain into something beautiful - for it to be the fertilizer for something loving and joyful and something that helped others. So that is why I chose the ending I did. And that is what the book is for me, something that sprouted from challenging times in my past, that is loving and joyful that I hope will help others. In a way the book is my rally, my sharing of a message of compassion and love to help others, and my closure.

12. Tell us about the bully, Russell.

I thought a lot about who to make the main bully in this story. I chose a Jack Russell, named Russell. I like Jack Russells and have grown up with family members having them, so it isn't a slight against that breed! I wanted a breed of dog that wouldn't be associated with any stereotypes and I wanted a dog that was roughly Henri's size.

In the story I give Henri (and the reader) a little glimpse at why Russell is a bully and show that there is always a reason for someone's behavior and more to the story. I also didn't want Russell to be just a villain and I wanted there to be a sense of understanding. Everyone is going through their own challenges.

13. Looking back, what would have been most helpful to your younger self, in addressing the bullying you experienced?

When I went through bullying, I felt a huge sense of shame. I thought something was fundamentally wrong with me. I think a lot of that came from isolation. It would have helped so much if someone had stood up for me or stood next to me. I think of one incident, when I was in a study hall, and the entire class started chanting "Egghead" (the name they called me because I have a big forehead) while I sat at my desk, starting at my homework and trying not to cry. The boy I'd had a crush on was in the class and chanting it too. No one did anything. The teacher didn't do anything. I walked to the front of the classroom, asked for the bathroom pass, and went to the bathroom and bawled. It was so hard. Sometimes no one stands up, or it takes a long time for someone to stand up. That's when I hope that outside messages, like the messages in this book, reach people. I hope that this book helps encourage people to stand up for others that are being bullied, even when it is hard. And I hope that it helps people who are being

bullied to know that there is nothing wrong with them, even when no stands up for them at that moment. They are not shameful. They are lovable, and life has challenges, and things will be ok, and they will come out the other side even more beautiful. And they might be able to help others because of what they went through.

14. What are some lessons that have you realized for your current self, while going through the process of writing this book?

I've learned a lot through writing this book. One interesting thing I've seen arise is that the messages I've written in the book often apply to my life now. I catch myself bullying myself with negative self-talk and in response to that negative self-talk I find myself telling myself lines from *Henri and the Magnificent Snort*. Sometimes you teach the things that you need to learn. It can be a way of teaching yourself.

15. What was your relationship with books growing up? Where did your love of children's books begin? What were some of your favorite books to read/who were your favorite authors to read, as a child? And why?

Growing up my parents owned an independent traveler's bookshop called Word Journeys. It had books about all around the world and it also had a children's book section, so that kids could have a place to read while their parents browsed. My younger sister and I spent hours there. I always loved books. My parents fostered that in me. Also, my grandma Peggy, who was a kindred spirit, wrote a children's book about her younger sister's doll and an adventure she took traveling with her family. It was so inspiring. I loved to read, and I loved to write as long as I can remember - even before I could read or write. I would come up with stories and my mom would write them down and I'd draw the pictures for them. Once I could read, I read everything. (Before that I'd make up my own stories as I turned the pages of books.) I had random favorites as a child. I was obsessed with a book about blue whales, and another about Greek mythology, and lots of books about fairies and mermaids and unicorns. Different stories and illustrations made me feel lit up inside. It still lights me up inside when I pick up those books. (My mom has bookshelves of children's books in her office and so many of my favorites are there.) As a small child I was a huge Winnie the Pooh fan. I still love Winnie the Pooh. (I have a sketch my grandmother did of Winnie the Pooh in my bedroom.) When I got a little older, I loved Roald Dahl. His books are still so fun to read. But there were so many. I can see the illustrations in my mind and feel the feeling I had opening different pages. It was like traveling to a different world. It still is.

16. What books/authors do you currently enjoy reading? Why?

I read a variety of things, but I really enjoy reading memoirs and find myself continually drawn to them. I love Anne Lamott, Jeannette Walls, Glennon Doyle, Elizabeth Gilbert, Laura Lynne Jackson, Monica Holloway... there are so many. Reading memoir makes my heart feel connected to life. It's like a glimpse inside of other people and how they think and a beautiful reminder that we are not alone, no matter how weird we feel that we are.

17. Can you tell us a bit about Henri and his personality?

Henri was my 30th birthday present from my parents. He was four months old when I got him and the most precious little being I had ever seen. He was named after French King Henri IV. I had no idea what I was doing, and I also had no idea that my heart could feel so much love. I could literally feel it in my chest. And it only continued to grow.

Henri had the most positive, upbeat, sweetest, goofiest personality. He was endlessly entertaining and endlessly lovable. He had the most soulful, beautiful eyes. He would look at me, and I would feel his love. He had a famous Frenchie howl, and he did countless funny things. He would snort to me when I talked to him. He would sniff people's eyes. He would army crawl around the carpet. He would do Frenchie zoomies (running in circles). He would sleep in the diamond of my bent legs. The way he embraced life was my inspiration. He was my hero and when people said that he was the way he was because of me, I felt so honored that they thought that. But I think he was the way he was because that's just how he was. I was so lucky to be his mom.

18. Can you tell us about the illustrator of the book, Hannah Farr? I see she lives in Cornwall, England. How did you two come together? How long have you worked together? What was the process of working with her on this book?

Hannah Farr has been the most extraordinary illustrator and friend to work with on this book. While we live 5,353 miles apart and have never actually met face to face, we have spoken on a regular basis for ten years and I feel so grateful to have her in my life. I first met Hannah in 2013, when I reached out to her through her online Etsy shop and asked if she could paint a custom pet portrait of Henri. She painted him as a king, and it was so precious; I still have the framed painting hanging in my hall! I then commissioned more art from her, for family, friends, and myself and we also worked together on Instagram contests, which was really fun. When I had the idea of creating a children's book about Henri, I immediately thought of her.

I couldn't have asked for a better illustrator. She is so talented, so kind, so creative, and so incredibly easy and enjoyable as a creative partner. I was so lucky to have her on my team! We would go back and forth with ideas, brainstorming, sketches, tweaking, and creating the beautiful illustrations that now fill the pages of the book. We worked on the book together for 8 years, and sometimes she would ask me if she could redo something, because she felt that her creative skill had improved, and she felt that she could do it better. It was mind-blowingly wonderful to work with her.

I later learned that I was one of her first ever commissions, which makes me feel honored! It has been amazing to watch her blossom as an artist. She is now a full-time internationally acclaimed artist, with glowing reviews, and has painted thousands of pet portraits through her shop www.hannahfarr.co.uk I cannot say enough wonderful things about Hannah Farr.

19. In the acknowledgments at the end of your book, you thank the people who supported you when Henri passed and your work to strengthen animal rights, related to Henri's passing. What role did Henri's passing, and the subsequent lawsuit, have on how you approached telling the story of *Henri and the Magnificent Snort*?

Henri's death and the subsequent lawsuit was one of the hardest things I have ever gone through. When it happened, the rough story of *Henri and the Magnificent Snort* had already been written and most of the artwork had been completed. However, for a long while, I did not know if I was going to publish the book. When I had written the book, I had also thought that Henri would be with me as I did readings and book signing tours. I was also really struggling with my grief and simultaneously dealing with the trauma of bringing a lawsuit and doing what I hoped would protect other animals from Henri's fate. Interestingly, sometimes the words from my book helped me go forward. I remember during a tough time during the lawsuit looking through the draft of the book at Henri on his soapbox and reading the words I'd previously written, "He was going to hold a rally to share what was true, and help others benefit from all he'd been through," and thinking how my life was now like the book and now it was me,

standing up for Henri and other animals. So I kept pushing forward. And eventually I kept pushing forward with the book too.

20. When you think about Henri, are there things about him that have been coming to mind for you in larger ways, now that the book has been released?

I have been feeling emotional with this book launch. Feelings of love, feelings of grief, feelings of big emotional releases where I'm not even sure what I'm feeling. There is a kind of rawness, but not in a bad way. It feels healing and also like I'm tapped into a softer and more present part of myself. I cry easily. I feel so touched by the words of others. It's been interesting to observe myself. It's interesting being human!

In a larger sense, I love that Henri's legacy will continue on through this book and that he will be in people's homes and lives, bringing joy like he has always done. So many people thanked me for sharing him with them, through his Instagram account, which I found such a beautiful compliment. I loved that a being who I loved so much, was also loved by people around the world, and that my sharing of photos and videos of my dog – something I loved to do – brought so many people joy. Sometimes you don't realize that the little things you do can have a beautiful impact on others.

I remember early on in managing Henri's Instagram when I started to understand that it was more than just me having fun taking pictures of my dog. A man wrote to me and told me that he suffered with severe epilepsy, which sometimes was so bad he couldn't leave his home, and that seeing pictures of Henri every day helped him get through the hard times. I felt like I had been knocked over when I read that. Another woman wrote me to tell me she and her toddler daughter, who was sick and in the hospital, loved watching videos of Henri from her hospital bed, and could I post more videos. So I did, and I also sent her daughter a Frenchie piggy bank that I painted, and her mom sent me a video of her daughter squealing with joy opening it. Later, one video that I posted on Henri's account showed Henri getting k-laser (a pain free laser treatment) on his spine and hips. I told Henri's followers how much it had helped Henri's walking. Over 2.5 million people watched that video, and I got numerous messages from people telling me that they were told to put their dogs to sleep, then got k-laser because they saw Henri's video, and now their dogs were running around their back yards. They sent me videos. It made me cry. I had no idea that Henri would have such a huge effect on people. That he would be so loved. That he would help so many people. It was beautiful. And it all happened while I was just doing something that felt natural to me.

Now this book will be another way that Henri can help people. And it will be another way that a little project I enjoyed making can go out into the world and be a part of people's lives. People have been thanking me and writing the most beautiful reviews. People have told me how the book has helped their children who have been bullied. It is all so touching. I feel so humbled and grateful at the same time. I hope that this book will help so many people, of all ages, see their own lovability and their own magnificence. Henri did that for me every day, and I want to continue spread that.

21. Will we see Henri again in any forthcoming books?

It's definitely a possibility! I plan to keep writing, and I wouldn't be surprised if Henri appears again somewhere in the future, whether it is in another children's book or in another form of writing or both!

22. What's been challenging about the work of creating *Henri and the Magnificent Snort*?

One of the challenges that I faced was learning to trust myself and follow what I felt called to do when I was being given lots of conflicting advice. I was told not to make the book rhyming. I was told not to have the dogs talk. I was told not to go into the project with my own illustrator. I was told to make the book shorter. (I actually did cut a lot out but not nearly as much as I was told to cut.) Often times I was given opposing advice. If I listened to everyone, I wouldn't have been able to write a single word. You can tie yourself into knots trying to do things perfectly or trying to please everyone. And it will take the joy out of it. What I am loving now is being complimented on decisions I chose to do that I'd be specifically told not to do. It feels really nice having listened to myself and having my choices resonate with people. It feels like a connection with my authenticity, if that makes sense. It's like a wink from the universe.

23. What's been rewarding about this work of creating *Henri and the Magnificent Snort*?

It's rewarding to hold a book in your hands, with your name on it. To have people buy it and give it as gifts. It's a bit surreal. Watching people read my book feels very surreal. I wonder if that's how all authors feel. Also, the reaction to my book has been incredibly rewarding. People have written me the most wonderful things – breathtaking things – and I didn't realize that would happen. I didn't realize that this little story inside of me would mean so much to others. That it makes people cry really touches me. I can't think of a better compliment. Hearing that kids are requesting it every night as their favorite bedtime story. Wow. I love hearing that so much. What a wonderful review!

24. What has doing this work taught you about yourself?

This book has taught me to trust myself and the universe more. To worry less. (Although I'm still working on that one.) To trust that there is something naturally valuable within myself that, when I open myself to the world, will help others when I share it. That being imperfect is the point. That I too am lovable, snorts and all.

25. What is some of the best advice you've ever heard?

Chose love over fear.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about the concept of how everything you think and do either stems from love or from fear. And that all you have to do, in any situation, is chose the thought or action or perspective that stems from love. Chose love over fear. I love how it all boils down to that.

Everything is happening for you, not to you.

I also love the idea of looking at everything in your life as though it is happening for you, not to you. Even the things you might at first label as bad. When I do that, I feel this inward shift, and feel like life is working for me, to help me grow in ways that my soul is requesting. It changes the tone and feel of difficult times. In the book, I talk about this when I say, "When life gives us challenges, they are opportunities to grow, just like storms feed the plants and give us rainbows."

Don't worry about what other people think.

The last piece of advice that comes to my mind at the moment and is one that I feel I learn over and over throughout my life, in different ways and through different messengers, is "Don't worry about what other people think." It is so basic, and so important, and yet one that I continually relearn. Something I've thought about recently is how people's thoughts and opinions are fluid, including my own, and they are based on a limited and skewed perspective that says more about the individual person and what they are going through than they do about

what they are judging, and perspectives also change. So living trying to please others is trying to live in a world that doesn't exist. You are just torturing yourself for no reason. You are worrying about something that you made up in your own head. You never fully know what someone else is thinking, and regardless, thoughts change. My own thoughts and opinions and perspectives change. We are all constantly growing. Let it happen.

26. What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

I'm allergic to dogs. Before I got Henri, I went to an allergy clinic because I wanted to be given shots to help me so that I could get a French bulldog, which had been my dream for years. They said that first they had to give me an allergy test, and they pricked me with lots of things, I think, mainly different trees and pollens. I started to swell up so badly that they freaked out and gave me an emergency shot and an epi pen and quickly sent me home. They never treated me for my dog allergy. I got Henri anyway. And I wasn't allergic to him. It was meant to be.

I hum when I work. It just happens naturally. It is something I have done since I was a very young child, and has since I was a kid, although I'm better (though not perfect) at controlling it in public as an adult!

I'm a bug rescuer. I save bees and ladybugs and beetles and once a grasshopper on the beach and take them to flowers and plants or up the cliff. I do this almost every day.

27. What are some of your favorite passages from the book?

I have quite a few! Some make me smile and others seem like good life mantras. I hope that they all help others. Here are some of them:

"When life gives us challenges, they are opportunities to grow, just like storms feed the plants and give us rainbows."

"Like all other dogs, Henri was special and unique.
His mom thought he was the most special.
(But that's what all mothers think.)
He had big, pointy ears and a nose that was smushy,
brown eyes, a white chest, and two swirls on his tushy."

"Our differences are special. They're our gifts to be shared.
They shouldn't be shameful or a reason to be scared.
Of everything you could be and everything you do,
The greatest thing of all, Henri, is simply to be you."

"Not only are we all unique, we're also all connected.
Therefore, it makes no sense that you could ever be rejected.
Everything and everyone, including you and I,
are made up of the magic from the stars in the sky.
No one is less than, no one is more,
We are all exactly the same at the core."

“The words you tell yourself are the worst words you’ll ever hear.
Henri had tamed his inner bully. Now he had nothing to fear.”

“If you’re ever feeling worried that there is something wrong with you,
remember Henri the snorting Frenchie and know that you are lovable too.”