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Has Camera, Will Travel

by Meg Chorlian

In addition to researching and writing, Peter Lourie often takes his own photographs and includes them in his books.

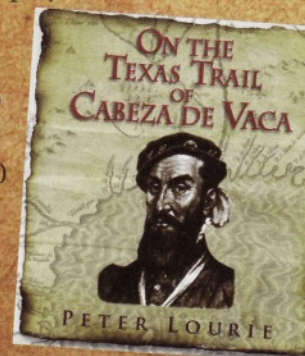


Peter Lourie is not your typical children's book author. First of all, he's very hands-on: When he decides to write a book about the Incas of Peru, the Anasazi of the American Southwest, or the Yukon River, he visits those locations. Seeing, hearing, and smelling places for himself helps Lourie bring them to life for his audiences.

Maybe it's the anthropologist hidden inside Lourie that makes him write books this way. His plan was to become an anthropologist. He even spent time in Kenya, Africa, studying ancient bones. But a story about hidden Incan treasure turned his attention from anthropology to exploring. While he never

found that treasure, he stumbled upon a career that has proved incredibly rewarding—for both Lourie *and* his audiences of children. Not only does Lourie fill his fascinating books with adventure and discovery, he also devotes about a week every month to visiting schools and showing students firsthand how a book grows from an idea into a finished project.

Lourie's 2008 book *On the Texas Trail of Cabeza de Vaca* describes his efforts to retrace that Spanish explorer's route—taken nearly 500 years ago! Lourie recently shared a few insights with



us. For more about his many books and to see a virtual author visit, check out his Web site at peterlourie.com.

Your books seem to focus on a combination of history, nature, and adventure. How do you decide what you will write about?

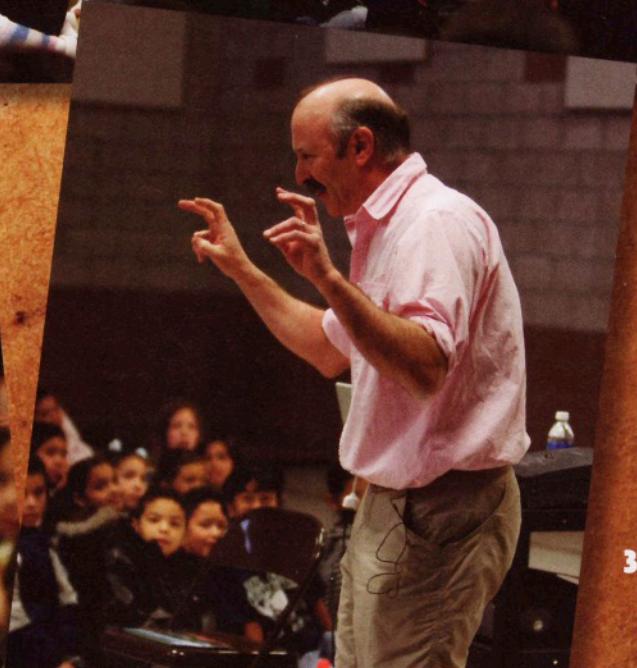
A good friend of mine once told me to keep a notebook. So I write down ideas as they come to me. For example, I'd always wanted to go to Tierra del Fuego. I filed the idea away and then proposed it to my publisher one day. The timing was right: It's got elements of discovery and explorers, Charles Darwin and Ferdinand Magellan, so it fit both science and history niches in the schools. That adventure became the book *Tierra del Fuego: A Journey to the End of the Earth* (2002).

Lourie travels around the country entertaining and enlightening students with stories of how he researches and writes his adventure books.

I've been very lucky in that almost every personal interest I've had has pretty much ended up in print. Egypt has always been on my list. I always wanted to do something on underwater archaeology. I am working on projects for both these subjects now.

How did you learn about Cabeza de Vaca?

When I was growing up, we had a condensed version of Cabeza de Vaca's book in our house. It intrigued me. I realized that this was a totally different kind of story. It wasn't a typical conquistador's story. Cabeza de Vaca survived an incredible journey. When I started reading more about him as an adult, I began to see that he had a unique story—he became a healer. He learned the art of healing from the native people and then healed people himself along the way.





Lourie's books have taken him from learning about polar bears in Alaska...



... to looking for treasure in Ecuador ...

Why do you think it is important for kids to know his story?

Cabeza de Vaca is not the typical conquistador, most of whom ended up having an enormous negative impact on the lives of the native people they met. Because he ended up living with the Indians and relying on them for his survival, Cabeza de Vaca really got to know the people of that time. He later wrote a book that described his thoughts, observations, and experiences. That makes him a conquistador worth learning about.

If you could meet Cabeza de Vaca, what would you say to him?

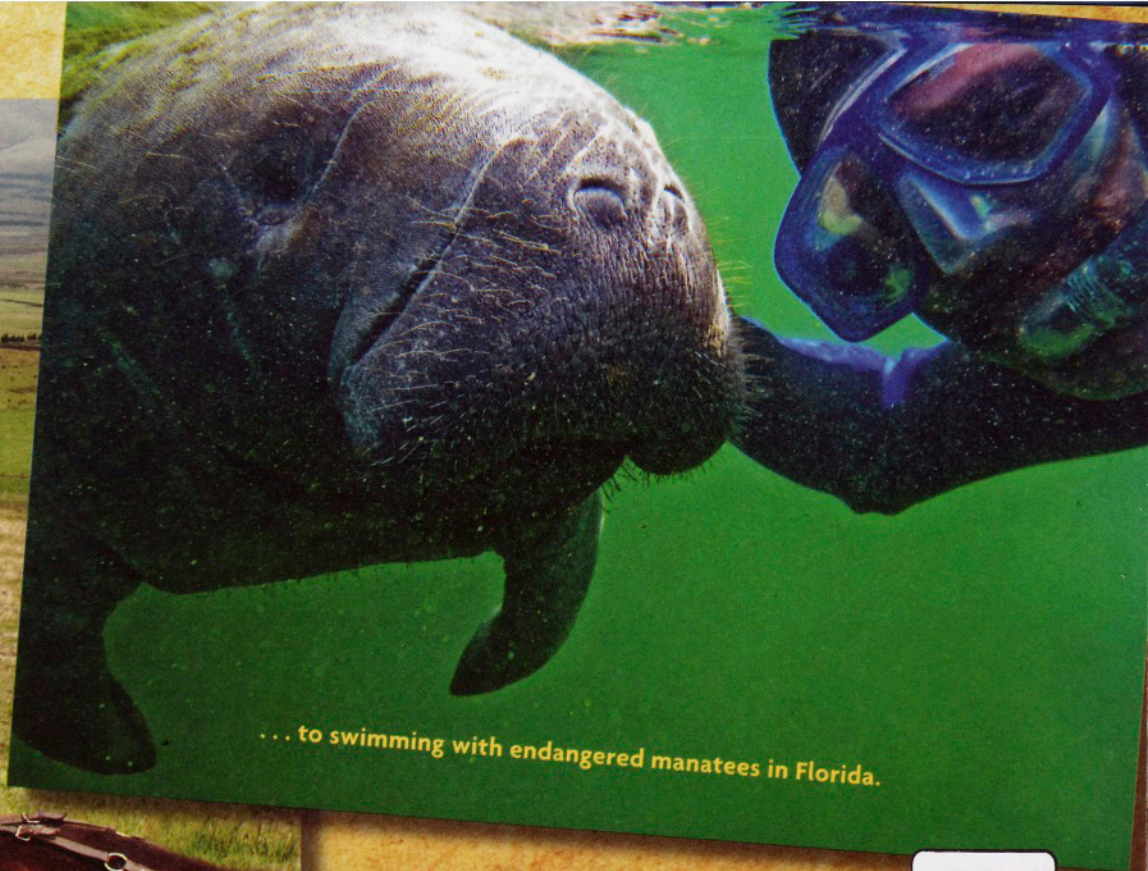
I would want to know how his experience changed him. When did he decide to go from being an arrogant Spanish conquistador who came to plunder and convert Indians to being a healer? Or was he always that way? I would definitely want to know more about his healing experiences. I don't think he would have survived if he wasn't able to heal. And

I wonder, what kept him alive for all those years in an unfamiliar world? How did he do it?

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I love exploring and researching. For me, researching is fun. It's like an investigation to learn, to explore, and to discover. I dive into a subject with passion. In my school visits, I walk the kids through the steps to making a book, and I tell them I do some of the same things they do—except I take a real journey. I do backup work and legwork. I interview and talk to many people.

If a person loves their subject, they'll share what they know with you. I could never write my books without the help of passionate people who love to share their knowledge and interest. For example, in the Cabeza de Vaca book, I flew down to Wilmington, North Carolina, to talk to



... to swimming with endangered manatees in Florida.

Professor David La Vere, an expert on Indians of the Southern Plains and the Southeast. While some stories suggest that Cabeza de Vaca became a slave to the Indians, La Vere offered a different spin on what may have happened: The Indians nursed a near-death Cabeza de Vaca back to health. But then he became like an uninvited guest who stayed too long. He didn't contribute to the community at all—he just ate their food. So the Indians put him to work digging for roots. It was such a fascinating perspective on things.

What advice would you give regarding being open to adventures?

I came across this motto once: "Proceed as the way opens." In life, you don't know what is going to happen. That's what's so cool. So you've got to be open to what comes.

I think it's important to know the difference

between real adventure and virtual adventure, too. It's important to get out there into the real world. We think there is no more mystery. Yet there's still so much history to discover—it's alive. For example, while there are probably 40 major Mayan cities excavated, there are probably hundreds of other major sites still claimed by the jungle waiting to be discovered and studied.

Any helpful tips for future adventure writers out there?

Read, read, read. Write, write, write. Be curious. Be passionate. Get out there. I'm scared everywhere I go. I've gone to unstable countries that were experiencing political unrest. And the jungle can sometimes be scary. But I still go, because I am always curious. And I am always glad I went. 🌍

How cool is that!

