

'Turtle Sisters' Delves Deep Into Pond Life, And Real Life As Well

by Debra Lawless

"The Turtle Sisters of Cape Cod Pond," (Turtle Press, 2011), an illustrated book for children ages four and up, is not solely for the younger set.

As befits a book written by a clinical psychologist, this story about the private life of pond turtles has multiple hidden meanings that will emerge depending on where you are on life's journey.

"A third of the copies have been bought by people over 75," says author Dr. Susan Baur during a telephone interview from her home in North Falmouth. Until 2009 Baur lived in Chatham. "It's the memory."

"The Turtle Sisters" is a tale told by two stinkpot turtles, Daphne and Chloe, "who lived in a small wooded pond on Cape Cod." Threatening their lives is a huge snapping turtle who lives at the bottom of the pond. Every day at 5 p.m. it creeps up from the deep "looking for anything it could catch in its powerful jaws."

One day a new element enters the pond — something that swims on top of the water. The turtles don't know what to call this human swimmer. Eventually the woman and the stinkpot turtles become friends of a sort. But the summer must end, and in November the woman no longer visits the pond. The turtles assume the woman is hibernating, as they will do.

"Will it remember us next summer?" Chloe asks about the woman.

"Yes, I think it will remember us forever," Daphne replies.

For Baur, "The Turtle Sisters" is a book of memories. In 2002 Baur published a psychology book called "The Love of Your Life: What We Learn from Living in the Grip of Passion." A review published in a local newspaper inspired Parker "Peter" Wiseman of Chatham, a former Chatham selectman in this town, to write Baur a letter about the book. Despite the nearly 20-year age difference, they entered a union that lasted for six years.

"The Turtle Sisters" is, at heart, also a hidden love story.

While Baur lived in Chatham, she swam in the freshwater ponds, particularly Goose, White and Schoolhouse. (And astute readers of "The Turtle Sisters" will recognize Chatham's ponds in some of the illustrations.) Each summer Baur took 60 or more swims, and began studying — and befriending, insofar as inter-species friendships can occur — turtles. With the use of a wetsuit she extended her swim season from May to October.

"I'd jump into the water and swim a quarter mile without stopping," Baur says. "Just power out and go the length of the pond. Then when I came back I saw turtles. If you do that three, four times a week, they get used to you." In July 2009 Wiseman gave Baur an underwater mask with a digital camera built into it. Using the mask, Baur photographed the turtles she had befriended. Because the turtles were usually out and feeding during the latter part of the day as the light faded, the photography posed great challenges. To illustrate her book, Baur worked on digital photographs with colored pencils and also added above-the-waterline shots. So each illustration is a collage created without computer enhancement.

Wiseman died in September 2009 at age 88 from complications following open heart surgery. "It was very awful," Baur said. Grieving, she decided to return to the home she had retained in North Falmouth, where she practiced psychology. "I lost Chatham, which I adore. I lost my favorite swimming places. I was triply bereft."

She began writing “The Turtle Sisters” for her granddaughters.

Yet in a press release she quotes a psychologist as saying that “stories are driven by imbalance” and “the willingness to handle imbalance by turning confusion into stories” represents the desire to live. So as Baur grieved Wiseman she wrote “The Turtle Sisters,” and it is this hidden element that older people, particularly perhaps widowed women, sense behind the storyline.

Turtles hibernate and hibernation is a deep coma, Baur says. “That’s what Peter went into.” So Wiseman is, essentially, a hidden character in the book. Baur dedicates the book to him. Marcel Proust, the 19th century French novelist who remembered his younger years with a taste of a cookie, “was right,” Baur adds. “Nothing is ever really lost.”

A native of New York, Baur came to Cape Cod in 1968 to research her first book – a history of oceanography which won a Pfizer Award for best book on the history of science. When she was unable to publish her subsequent book on hypochondria because the publishers said she did not have proper credentials, she went on to earn her PhD in psychology from Boston College.

Baur is now swimming in the ponds near her current home. Knowing so much about what lies beneath the surface of the water, isn’t she nervous to swim there? In a nutshell, no. While she always respects turtles, “I can tell when they’re afraid, when they’ll bite you,” she says. She reads turtles the way most of us read dogs.

Baur plans to make “The Turtle Sisters” book one of a trilogy. She also gives a lecture called “The Turtles of Chatham: A Five-Year Study.” A dollar from the sale of each book will be donated to the Walpole Ponds.

Baur will sign copies of “The Turtle Sisters” at Yellow Umbrella Books, Main Street, on Saturday, Feb. 18 from 1 to 3 p.m.



Dr. Susan Baur, author of “The Turtle Sisters.” COURTESY PHOTO