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Children's book about girl's love for caterpillars



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays

The first time Camilla saw a caterpillar, she mistook the creature for a more fantastical apparition: a dragon wearing sunglasses. But when she learned the insect's actual identity — a hickory horned devil, the 5-inch-long caterpillar that transforms into the regal moth — Camilla wasn't disappointed. She was entranced. • Thus begins the story of "Camilla and the Caterpillars," a new children's chapter book from Smokies Life written by Frances Figart and illustrated by Matt Brass. Figart, who also holds the position of creative services director at Smokies Life, said that she hopes the tale will give kids "that spark of hope that they can create the future they want for this planet" while helping families "see how important it is for them to support kids in realizing their dreams."

After that first encounter ignites her interest in caterpillars when Camilla is just 4 years old, over the following years she makes it her mission to seek out new species every time her parents take her to a new national park. But when her family moves away from their city apartment into a suburban home with a yard, she can't find a single caterpillar there.

"Compared to the city, it was very quiet," she narrates as a 12-year-old looking back on her life. "In fact, come to think of it, we couldn't even hear a bird singing or a bee buzzing." That's because the family's half acre was devoid of native plants and overrun with invasive species.

Then Camilla learns from family friend Carlos — who is "getting a PhD in nature" — about a movement that encourages people to create wildlife-friendly habitat in their own backyards. Carlos, Camilla and her parents get to work, and after several years of managing invasive plants and planting native ones, the property becomes home not only to Camilla's beloved caterpillars but also to bees, bobcats, barred owls and more.

Though the story is about a fictional child and her fictional family, it's informed by Figart's own journey toward understanding the important role native plants play in the ecosystem. Eleven years ago, Figart bought a home in Asheville whose small yard was filled with "a curious plant" that turned out to be invasive Japanese knotweed. When she started dating the man who later became her husband, he launched a two-year battle to eradicate the invader before the couple married and moved to his 6-acre property in East Tennessee, which he'd planted with a diversity of native species. Meanwhile, he slowly taught her about the important role these plants play in supporting a healthy ecosystem — unlike exotic ornamentals, they offer food to a variety of living things, supporting robust populations of caterpillars, birds and other wildlife.

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ABOVE LEFT: "Camilla and the Caterpillars" is author Frances Figart's third book for children. She also wrote "A Search for Safe Passage" (2021) and "Mabel Meets a Black Bear" (2023), both published by Smokies Life. PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Matt Brass is a Knoxville-based artist and founder of Smoky Outfitters, a company that creates art inspired by various destinations around the United States, especially national parks. "Camilla and the Caterpillars" is his first book project. PROVIDED BY ANDREW BRASS

TOP: "Camilla and the Caterpillars" tells the story of how one young girl's fascination with caterpillars sets her entire family on a quest to turn their backyard into a vibrant habitat for native wildlife. The new chapter book for kids ages 6-11 is published by Smokies Life. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE

"On our property [in Pennsylvania], I've been counting the number of moth species in the last five years that are now making a living at our house because we put the plants back, and I'm up to 1,199 species that have come back to our 10 acres. That's 44% of all the species found in the entire state of Pennsylvania. It's because we put the plants back. What would happen if everybody put the plants back?"

Doug Tallamy
Ecologist and entomologist

Vance bashes Harris at rally in Raleigh

Sarah Gleason
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

JD Vance, U.S. senator from Ohio and Donald Trump's running mate, rallied in Raleigh on Wednesday.

The visit comes as North Carolinians from East to West are experiencing a flurry of candidate visits. Kamala Harris just rallied in Charlotte and Greensboro last week, Tim Walz visited Asheville on Tuesday and Trump was in Charlotte and in Asheville in August and September. The blitz will continue into the weekend with the former president set to rally in Wilmington on Saturday.

Vance's visit also comes just days after what authorities are referring to as an assassination attempt against the former president at his Florida golf course on Sunday.

Outside the venue, a line filled with American flag dresses, MAGA caps and monochrome red power suits wrapped around the side of the Raleigh Union Station. The downtown venue is more intimate than a stadium and is located in downtown Raleigh -- a place that is home to the state's legislative business and has a solid blue voting track record.

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Early voting underway for presidential election

Kinsey Crowley
USA TODAY

The 2024 presidential campaign is going full steam ahead, but in some states, voters who have made up their minds can cast their ballots now.

Local election offices in Minnesota and Virginia opened their doors Friday morning for in-person early voting, the first in the nation to do so.

South Dakota absentee ballots became available Friday, and the state also allows absentee voting to be done in-person.

Ballots in other parts of the country are becoming available as well. North Carolina was scheduled to start sending the first wave of ballots to military and overseas citizens Friday. They were delayed by a court fight over whether former third-party candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. would be

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Book

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“I am not a green thumb,” Figart said, “and I gravitate more toward animals than plants. But when I started to understand that non-native plants weren’t helping, and it was the native plants that would bring the animals to a particular landscape, I could get behind the concept of planting native.”

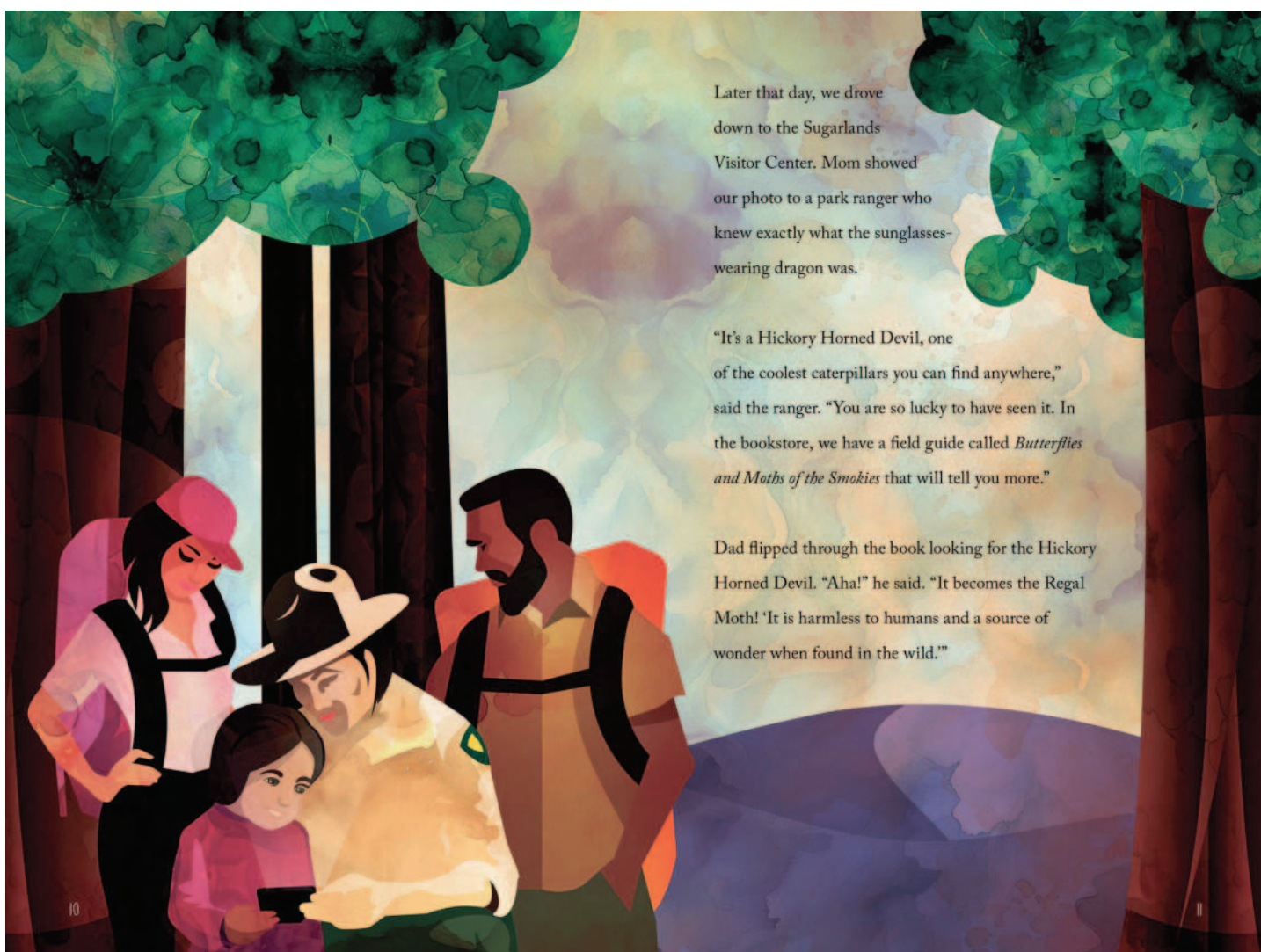
Figart’s second turning point came in 2023, when she interviewed ecologist and entomologist Doug Tallamy in connection with a talk he gave celebrating park partner Discover Life in America’s 25th anniversary. Since 2007, Tallamy’s work has focused on encouraging Americans to replace grassy lawns with native plants. There are an estimated 40 million acres of lawn in this country — converting half that amount to native habitat would support wildlife in an area larger than Great Smoky Mountains, Yosemite, Yellowstone, Badlands and Denali national parks combined.

“On our property [in Pennsylvania], I’ve been counting the number of moth species in the last five years that are now making a living at our house because we put the plants back, and I’m up to 1,199 species that have come back to our 10 acres,” Tallamy told Figart. “That’s 44% of all the species found in the entire state of Pennsylvania. It’s because we put the plants back. What would happen if everybody put the plants back?”

Tallamy gave his talk on Earth Day in April 2023. Two weeks later, Figart emailed him to ask if they could chat about a book concept. That conversation took place on May 15, and within three weeks Figart had sent Tallamy a draft of “Camilla and the Caterpillars.”

Figart hopes that young readers will see bits of themselves in Camilla, who she describes as “an introverted child” who connects to the world through stories of adventure, with imaginary dragons and fairies as the main characters. Meeting the hickory horned devil shows her that nature can be “even more amazing than make-believe stories,” spurring a newfound passion for the outdoors that gives her “a niche and a way to feel comfortable in the world.”

The text of the book didn’t change much from that initial version, but Figart knew that quality illustrations would be vital to bringing readers into

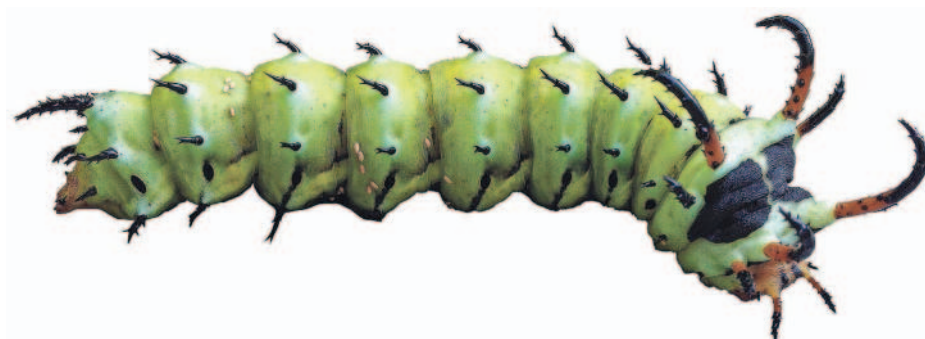


A colorful illustration by Matt Brass shows a young Camilla getting her first lesson on the important role caterpillars play in the landscape from a ranger in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE

Later that day, we drove down to the Sugarlands Visitor Center. Mom showed our photo to a park ranger who knew exactly what the sunglasses-wearing dragon was.

“It’s a Hickory Horned Devil, one of the coolest caterpillars you can find anywhere,” said the ranger. “You are so lucky to have seen it. In the bookstore, we have a field guide called *Butterflies and Moths of the Smokies* that will tell you more.”

Dad flipped through the book looking for the Hickory Horned Devil. “Aha!” he said. “It becomes the Regal Moth! It is harmless to humans and a source of wonder when found in the wild.”



In this real-life photograph of a hickory horned devil taken by author Frances Figart, it’s clear how her book’s young protagonist might have mistaken the caterpillar for a “tiny dragon wearing sunglasses.” PROVIDED BY FRANCES FIGART

Camilla’s world of adventure and imagination. For that, she contacted Knoxville-based artist Matt Brass.

Though Brass had never illustrated a children’s book before, Figart loved the colorful, imaginative style he exhibited

in his other work, such as the commemorative, place-based sticker designs he produces for his company Smoky Outfitters. And for Brass, who previously spent 17 years with an ad agency specializing in sustainability and environment, departing as vice president of creative, Camilla’s message resonated loudly.

“I actually have a yard like that myself,” he said. “We have very little grass, and we have a lot of native plants, a lot of insects. So it’s very close to home for me.”

Brass’s first priority as he began work on “Camilla” was to develop the title character, creating a look that was both distinctive enough to communicate her unique personality and versatile

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Book

Continued from Page 5A

enough to display the range of emotions Camilla experiences throughout the story, as well as her growth from a four-year-old in the book's first pages to a sixth grader in its last ones. He described his approach to the scenes as "a visual version of how Charlie Brown handled audio" — that is, the adults are stylized characters that almost fade into the background, while the children, Camilla and Carlos' son Diego, are more detailed. With support from Smokies Life's Design Team Manager Karen Key, who designed the book, Brass used a digital tablet to create his illustrations, applying a collection of digital watercolor washes to saturate the scenes with the vibrant color that imbues the fantastical quality found in "Camilla's" pages.

The result, he said, is something he's proud of — both artistically and philosophically. It's easy to get caught up in the world's seemingly unsolvable big-picture problems, but lately, Brass has been embracing the idea of simply getting up in the morning and doing whatever right thing is within his control to do. Just one year after planting his lawn with native species, he can see the tangible results of this new philosophy whenever he looks out the window.

"There's a little bitty world in my backyard that didn't exist, and that's a powerful thing and a beautiful thing," he said. "I haven't changed the world, but I've created a little world of my own where these creatures are living."

That's a priceless gift, Figart agrees. About five years ago, she put up trail cameras to monitor her property's nighttime visitors, and now she's regularly treated to images of bear, deer, fox, coyote, opossum, skunk, raccoon, long-tailed weasel, flying squirrel and bobcat.

"These precious members of the animal kingdom are here because we have returned the plants that belong here," she said, "restoring the landscape as Camilla and her family do."

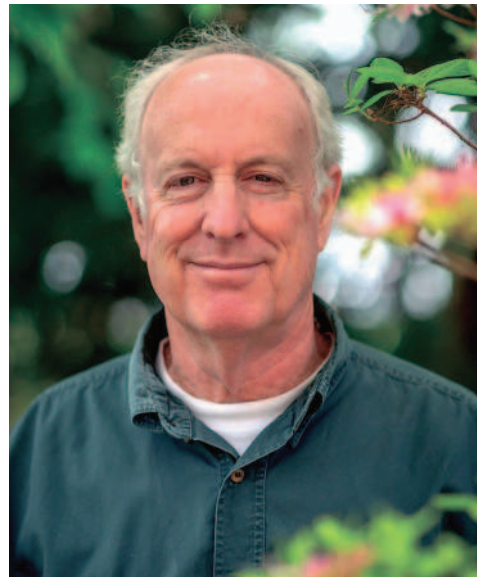
A pair of upcoming book signings will introduce "Camilla and the Caterpillars" to the public. Smokies Life and Discover Life in America will host a book launch from 6-8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 3, at Ijams Nature Center in Knoxville, Tennessee.



Krista De Cooke, of Homegrown National Park, will speak, and Figart and Brass will sign books. Figart will speak at 10 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 5, during the NC High Peaks Trail Association annual meeting held at Burnsville Town Center in Burnsville.

Purchase a copy of "Camilla and the Caterpillars" at SmokiesLife.org. For information about how to establish your own Homegrown National Park, visit HomeGrownNationalPark.org.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Reach her at hollyk@smokieslife.org.



ABOVE: A painted lady butterfly lands on a butterfly milkweed flower. Native plants are key to preserving biodiversity because they have evolved close relationships with native insects and wildlife that allow energy to be passed up the food chain more efficiently than is the case with non-native species. PROVIDED BY EMMA OXFORD

AT LEFT: Author Frances Figart's original inspiration for "Camilla and the Caterpillars" came from Doug Tallamy, an entomologist and ecologist who emphasizes the collective impact individuals can make by transforming their backyards into pockets of native habitat. PROVIDED BY ROB CARDILLO

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