



NEWBERY MEDAL AUTHOR

Patricia MacLachlan

Patricia MacLachlan is a well-known and beloved, award-winning author of picture books, chapter books, and screenplays. With a signature style and timeless themes, her work is appreciated by readers of all ages and levels. Bound by a love of family and of nature, Patricia MacLachlan's heart is expressed in her writing and in her conversation. Here, the author of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* and *The Boxcar Children Beginning* shares with Mackin's Amy Meythaler how her writing journey began and where it is leading her now.

Embracing the Past

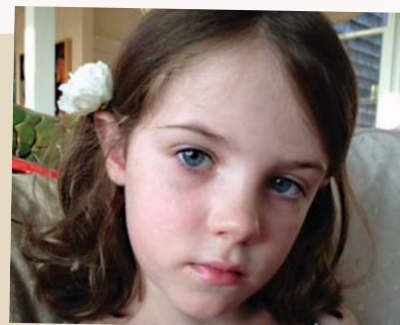
You have such a distinctive, elegant writing style that appeals to readers of all ages. What is it about your style that attracts a cross-generational audience?

We write what speaks to us and to who we are. When I write, I'm writing for me the adult and me the child. I haven't moved very far from childhood. I have such an active memory of what it was like to be a child, so I'm writing for the adult and the child at the same time. I set things in mostly rural settings,

and my themes are the same all the time: kindness, hope, loss, and families where one of the members is taking a time out—a father leaves for a while, or as in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* a mother has died.

I was on a panel once with Natalie Babbitt discussing where our ideas come from. She mentioned that the most exciting part of her life was her preschool days. She went on to say that everything she worries about now she worried about then. I think she is right. Everything I write about—and say is about my grandchildren—is

really about me at the same time. We are connected no matter our ages: we do the same kinds of things and are worried about the same things like loneliness and loss.



Patricia's granddaughter, Sofia



My granddaughter, Sofia, was very upset and inconsolable when her dog died. On her own, Sofia wrote a note, pinned it on her dress, and wore it to her first-grade class the next day. It said, "My dog Tessie died." She put it there in a brave way so she didn't have to explain it to everyone while crying, and she came home comforted by her own words. Then I remembered when my dog Scooter died in Wyoming, I taped a sign on the front door that said, "Scooter is gone," because I didn't like the word dead. Look how connected we are!

It seems that all of your books are so grounded in the place where they are set. What is it about place that causes you to give it such a prominent role in your writing?

I wrote a book about what you know first, and it really is true: What you know first resonates with you. You become attached to place. It has meaning for you, and it undoes you to leave sometimes. My first

memories are of my mother's hollyhocks in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and I remember the prairie. Even now I love the flatness and the space and the big sky of the prairie.

Rumor has it that you carry dirt from the prairie with you. Is that true?

Yes. I remember grabbing my first sample from Cheyenne when I left. See? Even at five years old, I felt a sense of place. Anyway, I liked to carry it to remind me where I came from. People would hear about it and then give me packages of soil—some were wrapped really nicely, too. I now have about 20 bags at home, and I feel it is enough. I used to carry my prairie dirt with me when I would travel, but that changed when the TSA (Transportation Security Administration) began going through everything at the airports. I kept being asked what it was, and I would say that it was my prairie dirt. They'd just look at me strangely, so I don't carry the dirt anymore. I don't want to give it up, but life has changed.

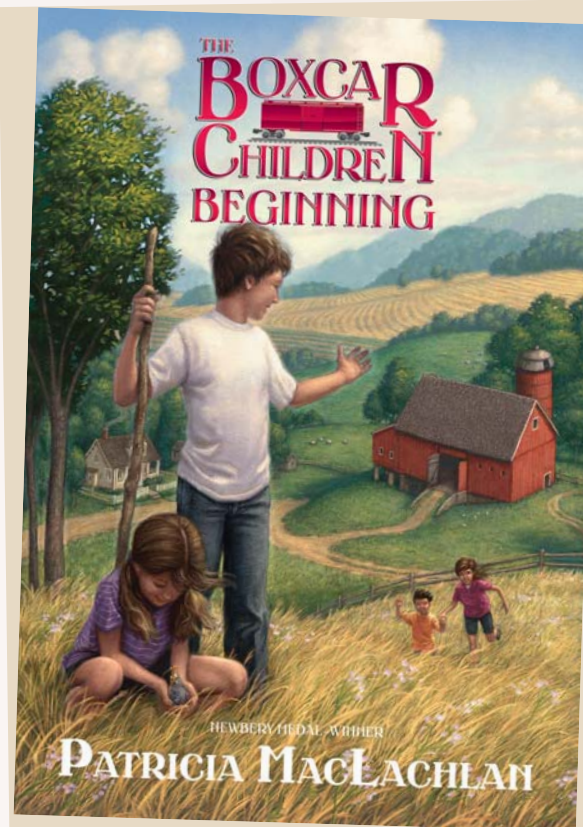
Although you were born in Cheyenne, Wyoming, you spent some time in Minnesota. Do you remember those years?

Oh, yes! We left Cheyenne for Rochester, Minnesota, when I was about five years old. My father was supervisor of schools. I went to school in Rochester until about fifth or sixth grade, and I liked it there. My mother loved Rochester so much that she cried when we left!



What was childhood like in your home?

Mom was a teacher early on and then became a stay-at-home mother because she liked it. Dad was a professor of curriculum in the education department



at the University of Connecticut. I grew up with all the talk of all the things that turned out to be Common Core. My father had taught in a one-room schoolhouse, and he was implementing Common Core principles back in 1919. It is interesting that things seem to come back in circles.

As a child I loved to read and read. My mother would take me to the library and lead me across streets and back home because I was already reading when we left. Books were all over my house, and I would read everything and anything. (I notice that quality now in my grandchildren.) A favorite book was *Peter Rabbit*. My father and I would act it out. I still love the pictures.

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Where Story Ideas Come From

Usually I start a story with just an observation or a moment or a conversation that a kid comes up with. Then, the rest I have to work at—it's called the plot. I've learned that plot is character, and you have to get to know your characters because they lead you.

Funny things happen. Mo Willems lives in my town—he has all those pigeon books. Well, when I was in Chicago once, I was standing on a corner. All the lights were red and all the cars were stopped. Right then, a pigeon walked across the street in a crosswalk. It was such a moment! I said to this man, "Look, look!" And he said, "Yeah. It's a pigeon." I said, "But it's walking in the crosswalk!" I thought that maybe I would write my own pigeon book about a pigeon crossing the street. But there are stories out there, you know; all you have to do is pay attention and look.



I remember kindergarten. I loved kindergarten! I horrified my mother on the first day because she took me there and all these children were crying; but I turned around to her and said, "Don't you have some things to can at home?" She was so upset with me and so happy at the same time. My mother and my father were very accepting. I just hope to grow up to be as nice as my mother was. So far, I haven't made it; but I still have some time.

I didn't fancy myself as a writer when I was in college, though, so I became an English teacher. I think I really became a writer after having children. Then I began to look at children's books more and more, which was a real treat. I was

I'm very loyal to people. When that man who became my agent, Craig Virden, later became senior editor at Random House, he became my editor, too; and I didn't have an agent for a long time after. He took me to Charlotte Zolotow

“My themes are the same all the time: kindness, hope, loss, and families where one of the members is taking a time out—a father leaves for a while or a mother dies.”

Exploring a New Path

Do you believe your childhood and upbringing contributed to your career choice to be a writer?

I did not have brothers or sisters, but I had a lot of cousins. And all the kids in my neighborhood liked my parents better than theirs; so they were always at my house. Even though I was an only child, I was never really lonely. I do think that being an only child was the beginning of my becoming a writer. I made up stories and characters and wrote fiction in my diary. I remember I was in second grade and I “had” 17 boyfriends in various countries of the world!

drawn back to writing that way. I also lived in an area where there were many writers. Jane Yolen taught a course in writing for children, and I just went and took it. That was the beginning.

How were you discovered and were you an instant success?

I believe Jane Yolen actually sent one of my stories to an agent she knew who was starting out. He took me right away, and then I sold a book the same month on my own. It was just like firecrackers. But I've had a few rejections of manuscripts people don't want, too.

who became my mentor; that was a great gift. The best thing you can do is to find an editor who loves what you are doing, and then keep doing it.

What kind of manuscript would a publisher not want from you?

Well, I wrote a picture book on Henri Matisse. I wanted to do it in one long sentence, but I couldn't. Anyway, I called it *The Iridescence of Birds* because Matisse's father gave him pigeons and he liked the iridescence of their feathers. It was very dreary where he grew up. In his home, his mother put red



rugs on the dirt floors and on the walls so it was beautiful and colorful. She brought in fruit and flowers. He didn't paint until he was 19, but those were the things he grew up with and later became his themes. He said his mother loved everything he ever painted; I just thought that was interesting.

I was at a conference in California when I saw a favorite editor—not one of mine; one I'd like to work with. I asked what he talked about in his session, and he said that he had talked about what he buys and why he buys it. He asked what I talked about. I told him that I read all my stuff that doesn't work and won't sell. He asked what I meant, and I told him about my picture book on Matisse. I said that nobody wants a book on Matisse. And he leaned forward and said, "I do."

Do you have any books coming out soon?

This spring *White Fur Flies* comes out. It is based on my daughter's involvement with rescuing unwanted dogs. The *Truth of Me* novel will be coming out and two picture books published by Candlewick—*Cat Talk* illustrated by Barry Moser and written with my daughter Emily, and *Nora's Chicks* about my grandmother who came to America from Russia. I'm working on a novel about Africa with my son, John, as well as other assorted beginnings of books.

Recently *Kindred Souls* was published. It is a novel about my father who was

born in a sod house. I realized that I live out my writing seasons with the hummingbirds that come to my house. When they come in the summer, they come and look in my windows. I say, "Oh, oh! Quick!" And I boil up the water and sugar and get it out there, and they are all happy. They come in the summer when I really don't write very much. I spend a lot of time outside, and my life is bound up with these hummingbirds. So, when I wrote *Kindred Souls*, I said to my husband, "I want to write a book that begins and ends with the hummingbirds." It was just a little



thing for me to see if I could do it. And *Kindred Souls* does. It begins when the hummingbirds come and Uncle Billy is talking to them as he always does. Then, in the end, the grandfather dies and the hummingbirds leave.

Discovering the Process

You have cowritten with family members before. What is your process of cowriting—where do your story lines come from and how do you decide who writes what?

I've cowritten several books with my daughter, Emily. We feel the same way about words, so I said, "Let's write," and we did. We first wrote *Before You Came* and immediately sold it to HarperCollins. Then I said we could do more, and we did. It's getting harder to sell picture books, so we are going to try a novel.

Who writes what? Well, we get together, get one computer out, and start throwing ideas around. Or I'll send something over to her and ask what she thinks. She knows immediately what to do with it because she is a better editor than I am. So, it works really nicely to write together; and it is nice to work with somebody because writing is such a solitary profession.

How does your writing process differ when you are working on solo projects?

I try to write a chapter every day. If I get up at 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning, no one is awake. I get my coffee and get up to my writing space. That's when I'm really intelligent and creative and can make things work. Around 9:00 or 10:00, that productivity drops off. So I will write a talk or answer kids' fan mail that the publishers send me. I get the greatest letters from kids; they are so honest. I got three letters that are really funny:

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MacLachlan Musings

“You’d like to have your books last decades. You’d like to have them last and be around and be timely, so you can pick them up in the year 2080 and still like them. That’s what you hope for.”

“I write quiet books; they are not sis-boom-bah. I look at the sis-boom-bah books wishing that I could write them; but when I sit down to write them, they don’t come out as me.”

“I love my delete button. I’m actually going to put a sticker with flowers on it because I use it so much.”

“You know, we just pass things down. I hear my mother in myself. I hear my father. Sometimes, I hear them in my kids. It’s interesting how those ties just come down whether you like it or not.”

Fun Facts

Italian and Indian foods are two of her favorite cuisines.

She would enjoy meeting Maria Montessori and great painters such as Henri Matisse.

One of her favorite activities is going to museums.

She likes to travel to remote places where it looks like no one has ever been.

She loves the feel of the paper used in picture books.

Journey took the longest for her to write.

Sarah, Plain and Tall began as a picture book and was rewritten as a chapter book.

She wrote the screenplays for the five books made into movies.

She is a member of a writers' group that has met once a week for the last 30 or 40 years.

Her fourth-grade teacher told her, "You're certainly not going to grow up to be a writer!"



Dear Mrs. MacLachlan,

Sarah, Plain and Tall is the second to the greatest book I've ever read.

Love,
Robert

Dear Mrs. MacLachlan,

We read the book Sarah and saw the film. They are good but I've seen better. Best wishes anyway.

Love,
Maverick

Dear Mrs. MacLachlan,

I'm not married, but I hear you are. How is it?

Love,
Mary Bridgette

and hills. I write in that space and I play lots of Solitaire and I leave the television on when I write—I put the news on because I want to know what is happening in the world since writing life is so isolating.

Are you a computer person or do you write your manuscripts by hand?

I'm a computer person. I can hardly write script and practically have to relearn it when I sign books. We don't write letters anymore because of email. I lament that because letters are wonderful and beautiful.

Do you journal?

I don't have time to journal! Everything that would go into a journal goes into my books. As Jane Yolen says, "I can see the threads of your life in your books." And it is true; you can tell what I was dealing with when it happened.

Reading Between the Lines

Many of your books reference kids using dictionaries or having favorite words. Do you have a favorite word?

My kids and grandchildren come up with words, and I tend to take my cues from them. I do love the word "iridescence"—that is why I called my book *The Iridescence of Birds*.

Though I do like words, I'm more interested in looking for and finding quotations about things I care about,

especially children, nature, and dogs. I like the one that somebody said,

Children need to learn words
to tell the stories they already
have in their heads.

And I like the one spotted on a gravestone for a dog:

He was not the sunrise.
He was not the sunset.
He was the sun.

I like things that touch us without preaching or telling us how to think.

Your books are like that—they touch the reader. Do you intentionally try to fill them with emotion and learning opportunities?

Actually, I try to be barer boned. I think if you overdo emotion, it is like beating the reader over the head. That is why I wrote the Boxcar book the way I did. A couple reviewers felt the kids didn't grieve, but they did. They grieved plenty but in an understated way. The Boxcar children were strong, optimistic, and not self-indulgent. They mourned softly and quietly. They understood they had to move on; they couldn't sit around and feel sorry for themselves. The Alden children really cared about each other and pulled together. I felt that if I beat the reader over the head with them weeping and wailing and being angry, it would not be true to those children.

In my books, life happens in the spaces between the lines. I think too much emotion just diminishes the real pain

This is why I like kids. Adults don't write things like this!

You mentioned that you have a designated writing space. What is it like?

I have a room with a door that closes! It has a television and a bed...like a little dorm room. It is at the top of the house with a fabulous view of the mountains

and purpose of the story. And I don't want to teach lessons. I subscribe to the Jane Yolen theory: If you want to send a message, use Western Union. What

Rubin Pfeffer. He said that it was a very interesting opportunity for me and that I could do it. So, I went and read a big batch of the Boxcar books and thought,

“I get the greatest letters from kids; they are so honest.”

we're doing is telling stories, and things just come through the characters. I try not to be heavy handed with lessons because I'd rather just let the story become part of the reader.

Speaking of the Alden children and the Boxcar book, how did that opportunity present itself to you?

I received an email from Albert Whitman & Company and then sent it to my agent,

“I can do this.” It seemed like something different, and it was a time when I had been writing so many books of my own. I was glad to do something a little different. And you know, it's good to do something a little different sometimes.

When writing *Boxcar Children Beginning*, I felt a great responsibility to Gertrude Chandler Warner because she was so good at what she did. She wrote for the children, and I respect that. I got to

meet her students recently. They came to a lunch at the little Boxcar museum in Putnam, Connecticut, and the men and the women were all talking about what she did for them. She was so loved. Since the Boxcar book came out, I've gotten very touching letters from them. They loved the book and appreciated the dedication to Gertrude and to all of them.

Do you anticipate creating additional adventures for the Alden children?

I don't know right now. I like the children and I like the characters I invented, both the neighbors and family who came to visit them, and perhaps I'll write a book one day where the children return to the farm with their grandfather. We'll see. ▴

Excerpts from MacLachlan's Work

“What's written becomes truth,”
her fourth-grade teacher
had once said,
and Cassie believed him.
Cassie Binegar

When we left, Papa put
a handful of dirt in his pocket.
I did too.
All the Places to Love

“Life is not a straight line,” she said.
“And sometimes we circle back to a
past time. But we are not the same.
We are changed forever.”
Baby

“Don't encourage her, Sarah,”
said Caleb. “Nothing she
writes is the truth.”

“It is my truth,” I said. “Mine.”
More Perfect than the Moon

“This is hard work,” said Nigel.
He closed his eyes.

“But sometimes it's fun,”
said Julia.
Bittle

“Things happen to point you in one
direction or another,” said Albert.
“You just have to look for them.”
Edward's Eyes

Ms. Minifred liked wondrous words.
She loved the beginnings of books,
and the ends. She loved clauses
and adverbial phrases and the
descriptions of sunsets and death.
Baby

Mama took Violet on her lap.
“It's only a teacup,” she said
to Violet. “It's just a thing.
Don't forget that, Violet.”

“But things are important,” said Violet.

“Not as important as family
and friends,” said Mama. “I can
always get another teacup.
I can't get another you.”
The Boxcar Children Beginning

