



## Author Interview

### **Have you always wanted to be a writer? What first inspired you to write for young readers?**

I think I've always known I wanted to be a writer. As a little girl I wrote stories on notebook paper, folded and stapled. Later I created handmade illustrated picture books, and then chapter books typed on a cheap typewriter. I made more than forty of these precious books, but they are now yellowing with age. Later still, after college, I tried my hand at historical romances but was too scared to make a serious effort to get them published. After 9/11 I wanted to go in a different direction and I returned to my roots, writing children's stories my children and someday grandchildren could read and enjoy.

### **What were your favorite books as a child?**

I absolutely adored Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad books. When I went to visit HarperCollins, I saw posters of the books in the hall and realized we shared the same publisher. That was a very special moment. Chapter books I enjoyed included *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Scott O'Dell; *Ginger Pye*, by Eleanor Estes; *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, by Elizabeth George Speare; *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, by E. B. White; *Heidi*, by Johanna Spyri; and the *Pippi Longstocking* books, by Astrid Lindgren.

### **Do you start with a plan or just dive in?**

I usually have a character in mind, and I go from there but not totally blindly. I have a few major plot points simmering—stepping stones for the main character's journey. I write on the computer but always have blank paper nearby for ideas that pop into my head. Sometimes those are the best ideas. I don't believe I could write with a detailed outline. I love what emerges as I'm writing. Stephen King once said that if the writer is not surprised, how is the reader going to be?

### **How do you build your fictional world?**

With *The Very Ordered Existence of Merilee Marvelous*, I drew a map that looked like a solar system on a large piece of poster board. Merilee was in a big circle in the middle, with her habits and quirks and her physical description. Surrounding Merilee, linked like planets to her sun, were other main characters and, like minor planets, the minor characters, and then, even farther away, the stars—the landscape, buildings, and landmarks of Jumbo. Later I added a sidebar of the major themes and imagery that started to emerge as I wrote, so that I could keep track of them.

### **How did you find Merilee's voice?**

The southern quality to her voice came naturally, as I was born and raised in Texas. The bumps, rhythm, and cadence were a breeze, as I had grown up listening to people like her my whole life. But I struggled with the autistic side of her voice through the many drafts of *Merilee Marvelous*. At first I had Merilee talking in full sentences and handing out advice to everyone in town as if she were Gandhi. I had to go back and cut her dialog dramatically. The reader learns on the first page that Merilee's words are trapped inside her, and this really is one of the most important elements of her character. She has a rich inner theater, as all kids with Asperger's syndrome have. I wanted the reader to know that everyone has stories, no matter how deeply buried the stories are.

### **What is the best piece of advice you have for a beginning writer?**

I believe you learn the most about writing from reading. Read always, all you can, in many genres. Your brain will subconsciously pick up the craft of writing—from the big things, like plotting and characterization, all the way down to the finer things, such as imagery, humor, word choice, sentence structure, irony, or suspense. But if you really want to be a writer, you also need to sit down and write, and do it on a continual basis.

**What is your favorite scene or moment in the book?**

There are many, but I especially like the scene with Merilee and Uncle Dal in the barn, and the moment she sees the finished hand on the statue. I still get shivers when I read it. Coming in a close second is the kitchen scene with Grandma Birdy and Veraleen and the pancake batter on the ceiling. I'm also particularly fond of the opening and closing pages of the book: Merilee's hello and good-bye to the reader

**Which character inspires the most response from readers?**

From adults I hear the most about Grandma Birdy. Many of them tell me they know someone just like her or they say she reminds them of their grandmas, poor things. But from kids I hear that Merilee is the character they most relate to—everyone seems to know and understand what she is going through despite her Asperger's. I suppose we all feel different in some way.

**Where did you get all of the urban legends, funny sayings, and odd facts in MERILEE MARVELOUS, such as the idea that elephants can't jump?**

Many sources. I'm a pop-culture junkie. I read the newspaper column News of the Weird, or google weird facts and trivia, read the newspaper every day, and listen to the radio. Biswick's giant Cheeto came from a call-in show, where the subject was oddly shaped food that people had found. One caller said he found a Cheeto the size of a drumstick. I remember pulling over and writing that down on a store receipt, and of course it made it into the book—into the first paragraph, in fact. The butt-spider legend I read about somewhere, but I added that they are found in Piggly Wiggly potties. I found a lot of funny sayings in books and also listened to people. At the hair salon, I once overheard someone say she was not looking forward to her great-aunt coming to visit because the great-aunt chewed on toothpicks and then discarded them everywhere. Perhaps I will use this someday, somewhere! I also subscribe to more than a dozen magazines and peruse the internet a little too often.

**How did you come up with Grandma Birdy, and why is she so mean?**

Grandma Birdy, she's a mean ole thing, isn't she? Cat-scratch mean, as Merilee describes her. Birdy Biedermeyer just came to me—poof!—she appeared on the page, personality and all. It wasn't till the end of the book that I figured out why she is the way she is. I think we are all haunted by the ghosts of our childhoods; Grandma Birdy has the ghost of her baby sister, Merilee, hovering over her and when her granddaughter Merilee comes along, it all comes tumbling back.

**Did you do a lot of research about dragons? Are all the stories about dragons from literature or other sources?**

I did do initial research about dragon mythology, and you can find some of that in Merilee's oral report I'm particularly fascinated by the belief that dragons are present in our unconscious, perhaps as a result of early man's fears of predator birds, saber-tooth tigers, and large reptiles. I made up the story of the moon dragon at the beginning of chapter 11, although it has elements of old dragon folktales. The celestial dragon in chapter 19 is another made-up tale. The Songbird of Sadness story at the beginning of chapter 14 is adapted from an old Japanese folktale. The dragons are a very important part of Merilee Marvelous. I believe that they represent hope and magic in the world, two things Merilee desperately clings to, although she doesn't realize it.

**What changed as you went through the drafts of MERILEE MARVELOUS?**

Many, many things, almost too many to list. I added characters and expanded relationships. Gideon and the other kids at school were barely mentioned in early drafts. Chapters were cut and chapters added. The chapter where Mama goes up the tree to retrieve Merilee's journal was a last-minute addition intended to explore the bond between Merilee and her mother. Even the first sentence was not in the early drafts. I expanded themes and symbolism. Dragons became much more prominent. I fleshed out scenes. I pared down language, added details of place and scenery, and explored the five senses. It was very painful in the beginning to dissect and rearrange my precious words, but it made the book ten times stronger. And without a doubt, whenever anyone tells me about his or her favorite part of the book, it is something that was birthed from the revision process. That is where the real writing begins.

**Did Biswick really have to leave? Why couldn't he stay with Merilee?**

Originally the story ended with Merilee and Biswick being carried down the mountain. Biswick belonged with Merilee and her family in Jumbo. I felt Merilee really needed him and he needed her. But as time went by, something niggled in the back of my mind. Something wasn't right. Something wasn't finished. It niggled and niggled, but I didn't want to face it. But eventually I knew that Biswick had to leave. He's Native American, and there might be someone waiting for him back on the reservation. So he needed to go home. When I wrote the section called "Good-byes," I actually cried. But when it was done, I knew it was the right thing. The story was complete. There was no more niggling and I was at peace. And I do believe people come into our lives for a reason, to teach us something. As Veraleen says, "nothing is forever."

**What is the best fan mail you have received?**

The letter that simply said: "merilee is just like me quiet with no friends".