

## **Who Is Katherine Paterson?**

In our conversations about teaching the novels of Katherine Paterson, the teachers with whom I collaborated on this project remarked several times that if they were to work with Paterson's books again in the future, they would do much more homework. Three of the four teachers spent considerable time researching the author's life and times as a backdrop for helping their students better understand her characters and her themes, and they found themselves eager to know anything I could tell them about her own experiences as a child, young adult, mother, and writer. All of the teachers noted that they did not always feel such a need to know the authors they teach, but with Paterson, the biographical information opened up her works and created connections among them and between the works and their students' experiences in ways they found valuable (personal conversations with Mary Christensen, Kathy Slingland, and Betsy Gardiner).

### **Receiving No Valentines**

The vibrant, successful Katherine Paterson of today was born Katherine Womeldorf in Qing Jiang, Jiangsu, China on October 31, 1932—Halloween—a time and place of much unrest (Schlick and Johnson 1999). Her mother, Mary Goetchius Womeldorf, hailed from Georgia, and was a “stern and proper lady whom Katherine feared more than loved” according to Marylou Morano Kjelle (2005, 13). Paterson's father, George Raymond Womeldorf, came from Lexington, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley. As the middle child in a family of five, Katherine was sandwiched between her older brother, Raymond, called Sonny, and sister, Lizzie. After Katherine came Helen and Anne. Sonny and Lizzie

were close; Helen and Anne were close. So Katherine was an outsider in her own family (13), as well as an outsider in the country of her birth.

Alice McGinty reports that Katherine had terrible temper, cried easily, and often behaved badly. She recalls that her mother would use a five-pointed gold star on a behavior chart but for any character trait they failed to exhibit on a given day, the children would lose a point. Katherine remembers sadly “looking up at that chart at the age of four and seeing a whole row of pointless gold nubs by her name” (2005, 9).

Paterson’s childhood was unusual in that she spent much of it outside of the United States. Paterson’s father was principal of a school for boys in China when Katherine was young. Her family lived in a pagoda-style house heated by coal burning stove. The children had a nurse, called an *amah*, and cook who prepared Chinese meals. Katherine’s favorite meal was steamed pork dumplings. Katherine spoke Chinese to neighbors and playmates (Kjelle 2005, 15). Her father was away from home a lot, traveling with a Christian pastor, Mr. Lee, on donkeys, taking food, medicine, and word of God to far-away villages (15).

Paterson credits the fact that she learned Chinese as a young child and that she lived abroad with helping her learn a “respect for people’s differences” that she tries to convey in fiction. Her first book, titled *Who Am I*, was published in 1966 by Covenant Life Curriculum Press, Richmond, VA. From that very first collection of stories, through her most recent works such as *The Field of the Dogs*, Paterson’s writing documents that one of her abiding attitudes toward her readers is this same “respect for others that she began learning at a very early age (Namovicz 1981, 395).

In 1938, a turbulent year as international tensions leading up to World War II were increasing, the Presbyterian Missionary Board asked the Womeldorf to leave China for their own safety. They planned to return to China as soon as it was safe. After taking a train to Hong Kong, they then sailed by ship to England, where they boarded another ship to cross the Atlantic—Katherine was five (Kjelle 2005, 16). Upon reaching America, at first, the family lived in father's hometown, but then moved to Richmond, Virginia, where Katherine started first grade. But, the Womeldorfs moved back to China in 1939, and Paterson started second grade at the Shanghai American School, and she wrote her first published poem:

Pat!Pat!Pat!

There is the cat!

Where is the rat?

Pat!Pat!Pat!

In 1940, the family moved again to Japan when Paterson's father accepted a position running a hospital in Zhenjiang. Katherine lived in a hospital room; there was no school available, so Katherine's mother taught her and other missionary children. At age 8, in 1940, Katherine and her family became refugees because they were in Japan and war between Japan and the United States seemed inevitable. By December of that same year, the family left for America once more (Kjelle 2005, 21).

Having lived most of her life as an outsider, an American in China and Japan, Paterson hoped for a sense of belonging upon their return to the United States. But her hopes were short-lived. When she returned to America, she was an outsider still. She had a British accent, wore clothes donated to the missionaries, and lacked any common

experiences with her schoolmates. In her collection of essays, *Gates of Excellence*, Paterson writes that her days at Wiley School were some of the most miserable of her life. When World War II broke out, Paterson was in third grade, and her schoolmates, thinking China and Japan were same country, called Katherine “Jap” and “Mish Kid.” They accused her being a Japanese spy (Kjelle 2005, 21). Paterson’s memories of fourth grade including hiding on the playground from a seventh grader named Pansy and her gang who terrorized younger children. She also remembers that her teacher counted her spelling words wrong when she used different method of penmanship than that which the teacher used (McGinty 2005, 22).

The family moved several times during WWII, so that Katherine lived in several different towns in Virginia, North Carolina, and West Virginia before her parents finally settled in Winchester, VA (Paterson 2006b). After WWII, in 1945, the Womeldorfs wanted to return to China, again as missionaries. The oldest two children did not go along as they were in the navy and college, respectively. The Missionary Board also wanted Katherine to stay back and attend boarding school, but her parents wanted her to go with them to China. Although the family never did return to China, by the time a final decision had been reached, Katherine had spent ninth and tenth grade attending high school in Richmond, waiting for that determination. Once it became clear the Womeldorfs would be staying in the United States, they moved to Charles Town, WV (Kjelle 2005, 24).

By 1947, when Katherine was 15, she had moved fifteen times. She recalls in an interview with *Bookpage* (Wilde 1993) that she felt lonely and different. In an effort to escape her daily reality, she turned to books and to writing. But she also notes that she still made good friends in each place, saying, “I always knew I was worth something

because I had many wonderful friends who knew all my faults and failings and they still cared for me” (Wilde 1993, 8). As she moved through high school, Katherine got involved in theater—some of her productions won state awards (Kjelle 2005, 24). It is clear that even as a young adult, Katherine had a gift for story telling, an ear for language, and a commitment to detail that would stand her in good stead when she eventually decided to become a writer.

### **Coming of Age**

After high school, Katherine went to Kings College in Bristol, Tennessee, where she majored in English. She says of those years, “I spent four years at King College in Bristol, TN, doing what I loved best—reading English and American literature and avoiding math whenever possible” (Patterson 2006b ). Note that at this point in her life, the four years at Kings is the longest time she’s stayed in one place. Paterson graduated summa cum laude (with high honors), and taught for a year in a rural Virginia town, Lovettsville. Her classroom was in the basement of Lark Creek Elementary School where she had thirty-six sixth-grade students, some sixteen years old because they’d failed several previous years (Kjelle 2005, 28). Paterson recalls that year with fondness, and notes that Jess of *Bridge to Terabithia* was based on her students there (Paterson 2006b).

After a year in Richmond, Katherine moved on to attend graduate school. She studied Bible and Christian education and planned to be a missionary. She had long dreamed of going to China both because she wanted to be serve its people but also because she missed good Chinese food! (Paterson 2006b). But, China was closed to Americans in 1957. Paterson was urged to go to Japan by her female pastor (Kjelle 2005,

29), but felt hesitant to do so, because, as a child, the Japanese were considered the enemy. She says, “I was afraid of the Japanese and so I hated them” (Paterson 2006b).

Paterson finally went to Japan despite her misgivings, and she came to love the country where she spent four years and learned the language. She lived in Shikoku, the smallest of four islands, in a home owned by members of a Buddhist sect, and as a devout Christian, she admits it was hard to hear them chanting prayers. She traveled on a used motor bike from church to church, helping eleven pastors with their Christian education programs (Kjelle 2005, 29). At that point in her life, Paterson believed she would spend the rest of her life in Japan. But she returned to New York for a year of study, and there met the young Presbyterian minister, John Paterson, whom she married in 1962 (Paterson 2006b).

The Presbyterian Church asked Katherine to write some curriculum materials for fifth and sixth graders. The church had paid for her year of study so Paterson felt she owed the church something. Instead of going back to Japan, she got married and she agreed to the project. That book, *Who Am I?*, helps readers explore different aspects of religion. Paterson states, “By the time the book was published, I had moved three more times, acquired three children, and was hooked on writing” (Kjelle 2005, 31).

### **Beginning to Write**

Paterson knew that she did not want to continue to write nonfiction. While giving birth to two children, John Jr., and David, and adopting two more, Lin and Mary, all in the space of four years, Paterson tried her hand at fiction, saying “I didn’t know that wanting to write fiction and being able to write fiction were two quite separate things” (Paterson

2006b). Paterson's friend in Maryland decided to help her by taking her to adult education class in creative writing one night a week. The novel she wrote in that course eventually found a publisher, and Paterson could legitimately call herself a writer (Paterson 2006b). Looking back at her life as a writer, Paterson credits her teachers with helping her overcome her fear of failure or of not being the best. A professor in graduate school told her to be a writer, but she didn't want to "add another mediocre writer to the world" (Paterson 2006b). The professor kept at her and helped her understand "that if I wasn't willing to risk mediocrity, I would never accomplish anything. There are simply no guarantees. It takes courage to lay your insides out for people to examine and sneer over. But that's the only way to give what is your unique fight to the world" (Paterson 2006b).

Paterson credits her years in China and Japan and strong Biblical heritage for adding depth to her books (Morris and Ramsey n.d.). A number of her books are set in Asia: *Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, *Of Nightingales That Weep*, *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom*, *The Master Puppeteer*, as well as a picture book which gives a retelling of *The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks*. However, she now says, forty years after having lived abroad, that she is not likely set a work there again because she has gotten shy "about writing about a culture I was not born into" (Paterson 2006b). She cautions readers to remember, when reading these works, that "it is my twentieth-century Western mind that sifts those faraway events and introduces to the reader the characters who allegedly took part in them. My books are not Japanese novels. They are Western novels about Japan" (1981, 73).

Paterson says her husband, John, has had the most influence on her development as a writer. He provided the financial support she needed to have the space and time to write. Moreover, as she puts it, “He was the one that made me put ‘writer’ on the IRS form instead of ‘housewife’” (Paterson 2006b). John always edits Paterson’s work, and is always convinced, even when she doubts herself, that she will be able to write her next book. Paterson notes that at some point in every book, she is convinced she can’t finish and she moans, and her husband listens and then says calmly, “Oh, you’ve reached THAT stage.” It makes me so mad I go back and finish!” (Paterson 2006b).

Another important influence on Paterson’s writing was her fifteen-year correspondence with her former English professor at King’s College, Dr. George Parker (Pat) Winship Jr. This communication began in 1978 when she wrote asking for his permission to use a poem of his in a religious essay she was writing for a Presbyterian publication (Fisher 2001, 150). Their letters continued to flow through November 11, 1993. At that point, Winship was just retiring and wanting to write fiction—especially for children, and he sought Paterson’s advice. He asked for feedback about his stories. She gave him information, provided advice, and also suggested books he might find useful in learning his craft, and she also shared her own work in progress with him. Later, she dedicated *Gates of Excellence* to him (151–52).

The Paterson children often squabbled over which one was the star of a particular book. She denies she ever modeled a character directly after one of them, although she readily admits that she worked through the tragedy her son faced when his best friend was killed by lightning by writing *Bridge to Terabithia*, and worked through her frustrations with her own performance as a foster mother by writing *The Great Gilly*



*Hopkins*. In general, Paterson says of her family “they were the very boundaries that gave form to my life” (1981, 32).

### **Reading to Write**

What is the origin of Paterson’s love of story? She notes that her mother read *Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie the Pooh*, from which Paterson can still recite the poems and stories of A. A. Milne. She heard, many times, the stories of Peter Rabbit, the tales from *The Jungle Book*, and fairy tales by the brothers Grimm. Also the *Bible* was a frequent source of read-alouds in the Womeldorf household (Kjelle 2005, 15). She taught herself to read before she went to school because she especially enjoyed Bible stories and myths.

Much later, as an adult, Paterson drew on her early reading experiences. She would rewrite Parsifal, from Arthurian legend, for modern audiences, using it as the basis for *Park’s Quest* (Johnson 2004). Robert Lewis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* influenced Paterson’s construction of *Jip, His Story* (Paterson 2006b). In general, Paterson says she wants to affect readers as much as she was affected by *The Secret Garden*, which she read when she was eight years old. She identified with Mary Lennox, its main character, and notes that she felt it to be a story of hope and drew her own hope from it (Kjelle 2005, 22). Paterson, as a young reader, also loved *Heidi*, *The Yearling* (favorite book at age 11 and 12), and books by Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, Kate Seredy, and Robert Lawson.

Later, as a young adult, Katherine encountered *Cry, the Beloved Country*, of which she says it “was a pivotal book for me. On reading it I had to face myself in a way I never had before. It was this book more than any other than enabled me to discover

myself. [My discovery] made a kind of healing and growth possible. A great book can do this for a reader. It can give us hope as it judges us” (2001a, 134). Paterson’s novel is about racism and made Paterson see the racial tensions in the south where she was living (McGinty 2005, 26). She often writes about issues of inequity and prejudice in her novels, about gritty and depressing realities of life, while creating hope in her readers because of the ways her characters reach out to each other, across boundaries of class and race, as is the case in *Flip-Flop Girl*, and help each other grow in the process.

Paterson’s reading continues to influence her writing. In *The Spying Heart*, Paterson recalls that she was resting at family vacation place at Lake George after finishing work on her novel *The Master Puppeteer*. She read the whole trilogy *Lord of the Rings* and decided she would someday “write a book and the central character is going to be a girl named Galadriel” (Paterson 1989, 26). Thus was born *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Gilly (Galadriel’s) last name *Hopkins* came from relishing poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, to whom she was introduced in college when her professor George Parker Winship, assigned her a paper on that poet. Now, Paterson says, “Gerard Manley Hopkins, like his namesake Gilly, lives in the deepest places of my soul” (1989, 26).

Paterson discusses Joseph Campbell’s idea that most of the world’s myths and legends can be reduced to a single story: “that of the hero who ventures forth from the ordinary world into a realm of wonders. There he is met by a supernatural guide who aids him as he confronts, then defeats, fabulous forces and returns the victor to grant boons to his fellows” (1989, 8–9). Paterson says her stories have “kinship” with this theme. “Do you realize how much effort is expended by characters in my books looking for the wandering father and, occasionally, the mother? And if the child knows just where his or

her parents are, geographically speaking, it is the child who is wandering . . . and the wandering . . . takes the child of my story into some sort of bondage” (1989, 9). As an example, in *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo*, Jimmy Jo’s favorite song is “Just a Poor Wayfaring Stranger” and his parents are wanderers. When Jimmy goes to Tidewater, he is taken “into bondage of the General Douglas MacArthur Elementary School” where he is helped to overcome his foes by supernatural helper, Eleazer. Thus Jimmy Joe is allowed to “give his gift to his fellows.” The name Eleazer means “God has helped.” There are many other such helpers in Paterson’s novels: Muna has the wordsmith in *Sign of the Chrysanthemum*; Tsakiki has the Empress; Jiro has Kinshi; Gilly has Trotter in *The Great Gilly Hopkins*; Louise, of *Jacob Have I Loved* has the Captain; in *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom*, Wang has Mei Lin, and Cha—and Shen, whom he betrays; and of course Jess, in *Bridge to Terabithia*, has Leslie (1989, 11).

A wide-ranging reader, Paterson loves Flannery O’Connor’s *Habits of Being* and *Mystery and Maunders* (essays on writing), counts the novels of Ann Tyler as among her favorites, is fond of two Japanese novels *Silence* and *Celestial Navigation*, and appreciates the fantasies of Ursula LeGuin. She uses her love of literature to help her when writing is not going well. Stuck once with writer’s block during the writing of *Park’s Quest*, she typed out a poem T. S. Eliot had written when he once felt uninspired, and then commented on it:

I know, dammit, what the territory is. It is Parzival—the wise fool, who becomes wise through compassion. It is the question “Uncle what troubles you?” It is the failure to ask the question and thus to leave the sufferer in his pain and lose the

grail for oneself. Writing books is asking the question over and over again.

(Fisher 2001, 132)

Commenting on the power of story, Paterson remarks,

When we moved from Maryland to Virginia, our youngest child was throwing up, she was so upset. She told me, “I’ve never had any practice moving.” That’s what books do for you. They give you practice doing difficult things in life. In a way, they prepare you for things that you are going to have to face or someone you know and care about is going through. They sort of help you know how it feels—though not exactly. It is the remove that gives you a deep pleasure rather than a total pain. (<http://content.scholastic.com/browse/contributor>)

Paterson now lives in Barre, Vermont, with her husband, a Presbyterian minister, her cat, CC, and her Springer spaniel, Princess. She spends her time reading, playing piano, and playing tennis; she says she does both badly but loves them both (Paterson 2006b). She quilts during the long Vermont winters, enjoys attending plays, going to the movies, and even admits to liking to watch some television shows, such as *West Wing*. She has tried her hand at pastels, and does a lot of traveling, having visited places as far flung as Cuba, Sapon, India, Sweden, Portugal, China, Venezuela, Columbia, Scotland, and Canada (Colorado and Perkins 2006). She has seven grandchildren—three girls and four boys—and she likes playing Scrabble and working crossword puzzles. And she loves to eat, still, Chinese food! Asked how she hopes her own children will remember her, Paterson says she wants to be remembered by them for how much she loved them and read to them.

While Paterson still doesn't think of herself as a writer, the world clearly views her as one the best in the business. In 1998 Paterson was given the Hans Christian Anderson Award—sometimes called “Little Nobel Prize”—which is the highest international award in children's literature and is awarded for an author's entire body of work (Kjelle 2005, 39). She is one of only two authors—Richard Peck is the other—to win the Newbery Medal twice in three-year period. In 2006, Paterson won the coveted Astrid Lindgren Award, which carries the second-largest cash value of any prize for literature in the world and was created as a way of honoring the importance of those who write for children and young adults by the Swedish Parliament. (Find her speech at [www.alma.se/page.php?realm=629](http://www.alma.se/page.php?realm=629).) Critic Gene Namovicz writes,

Katherine Paterson by virtue of her talent and integrity and joyousness, seems somewhat larger than life, so that it is hard to describe her without sounding extravagant. I must say first that Katherine is fun to have around. She is also funny, warm, and generous. She and her husband, John Barstow Paterson, complement each other. They argue freely, but they sustain and restore each other in adversity and even in good fortune, which is sometimes more exhausting. . . . She is a person of considerable vitality. She sings herself hoarse at choir practice, talks herself hoarse at lectures, meetings, and parties, and has the loudest, most genuine and unladylike horse-laugh ever sounded in the hemisphere—altogether a magnificent blend of Christian involvement and irreverent glee. (1981, 395–96)

### **Finding Hope—The Writer's Themes**

Regardless of the age or level of reading sophistication, students agree on three reasons why Paterson's works are so powerful. They talk about being able to connect to the characters, characters who face problems and issues they face in their daily lives. They appreciate Paterson's use of language and her ability to transport them as readers into the worlds she creates. And, perhaps most importantly, they value the way Paterson tackles important themes while always giving them hope for the future.

In general, *hope* is one of Paterson's major themes. Schmidt writes, "What is remarkable about Paterson's characters is that they learn hope. In the middle of dreadful circumstances, characters hope . . ." (1997, 444). Perhaps no work better illustrates this than *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Almost invariably, readers want Gilly to be able to return to Trotter's house, to be enfolded in Trotter's largesse and to have the family for which she has been searching. But Trotter tells Gilly she has to stay with her grandmother, and once students talk about this ending, so unsatisfactory on first reading, they decide Paterson knew what she was doing when made the decision to leave Gilly on her own. That is because both Gilly and her fans have hope that, having grown from all the experiences and having been nurtured by Trotter's love, Gilly is, in fact, now ready to face her future.

It is that same sense of hope that brings readers to tears at the end of *Bridge to Terabithia*. In spite of the incredible loss Jess has experienced, both he and his readers *know* that Leslie has taught him about hope and love, and these are lessons we know he is now poised to share himself, as he invites May Belle into the magical kingdom of Terabithia. "And it is that hope, rooted not merely in sheer blind optimism but in a real understanding that the world can be a difficult and bitter place, which enables Paterson's

characters not only to keep going but in some measure triumph over circumstances. . . . The pain is still there, and the hardship is not minimized, but there is hope for a better life” (Schmidt 1997, 444).

As a child, Paterson’s outsider status, first in China, then in the various locations in which she lived as a child and young adult, made loneliness a constant companion. She says herself that she often writes to comfort the outsider she was in her youth, and given that concern for acceptance is at the heart of most adolescents’ search for identity, readers respond to Paterson’s characters, who, while outsiders, are eventually able to accept themselves and then, often, help others move toward self-acceptance. The roster of Paterson’s outsiders is a lengthy one. Jimmy Jo is set apart by his extreme musical talent from his peers, and by his desire to be true to his own musicality, from his family. Jess is set apart by his artistic talent, by the fact that he is the lone boy in his family, and by his craving for a different kind of life than that which his family offers. Park is set apart by his ignorance about his father’s life, which ties him to Muna, also searching for his father in *Sign of the Chrysanthemum*. Even in her children’s books, such as *Tale of the Mandarin Ducks*, Paterson uses outsiders as her main characters: the samurai Shozo and kitchen servant Yasuko are set apart by having loving hearts in a cold, cruel court.

Lupe, in *The Flip-Flop Girl*, wears strange clothing, much as Paterson had to do when relying on donations of the church to her missionary family. Lyddie is, in some ways, different in that she has friends and is accepted into the mill “family,” but she loses her friends one by one, until she stands completely alone. Lyddie and Wheeze, from *Jacob Have I Loved*, have to lose everyone before they can become themselves, just as Gilly lands among friends, but she cannot accept their love until she leaves them.

Paterson says she writes for children because “I have within myself a lonely frightened child who keeps demanding my comfort. I have a rejected child, a jealous and jilted adolescent inside who demands, if not revenge, a certain degree of satisfaction. I am sure it is she, or should I say they, who keep demanding that I write for children” (1982, 329).

Paterson manages to deal with the outsider and his or her need for love and hope in a wide variety of forms. She translated *The Crane Wife* from Japanese; she’s written a controlled vocabulary book, *The Smallest Cow in the World*, for young readers; *The King’s Equal* is an original fairy tale; and *Blueberries for the Queen* is a family story from husband’s childhood, in picture book format. She redid *Who Am I?*, a nonfiction guide for young adults. Her lyrical language captures settings as varied as the Chesapeake Bay and the snowy winters of Vermont, as diverse as the magical kingdom of Terabithia and medieval Japan. She has published in at least twenty-eight different languages (Colorado and Perkins 2006). What readers value is that regardless of setting or genre, Paterson is truthful in ways other writers can only envy. Paterson says that a young reader wrote to her saying “I really respected *Bridge* . . . I would recommend it to everyone I know. You stuck to reality and you also stuck to a dream.” Paterson says that’s what she tries to do every time—stick to reality and to the dream (1990, 4). Her children take charge of their own destinies and affect the world around them, as Fisher writes (2001, 177), thus providing readers with models whom they can emulate when facing their own difficulties.

*Providing for Children*



Paterson wishes that children would read more so that they better understand the tension between reality and dream, so that they are better able to navigate the first without giving up the latter. She is concerned that computer information is a “rather shallow sort of knowledge and impersonal sort of human connection.” She feels “great books and real live human beings do a better job of making us wise, compassionate people” (Colorado and Perkins 2006). After the tragedy of 9/11 Paterson reports that someone asked, “. . . Will you now write stories about children going through difficult times and having sad lives? And then she stated laughing because she realized I’ve been doing that for 30 years. . . . I’ve realized how important art is to us, in such uncertain and tragic times. People have turned to music and stories. The director of one of our local art galleries told her volunteers to go home on September 11 because no one would come, and to the contrary more people came than would ordinarily come on a weekday. Art has a healing effect on us in these terrible times” (Colorado and Perkins 2006).

Critics believe Paterson is telling the truth about her goals as a writer. They note that she has a sense of mission about her work. “Her mission seems to be to bring hope, a glimpse of wholeness, a glimpse of holiness to children” (Fisher 2001, 154). Paterson herself states, “The ones [children] I know best wonder aloud at the supper table how nuclear waste can be disposed of, what to do about the starving, and whether to run away from home or take the math test that they have no hope of passing. After prayers have been said and the lights are out, they ask quietly in the darkness for assurance that their souls are not eternally damned . . . I cannot transmute their pain to joy, but I shall continue to try to provide a space where they can, if they wish, lay down a burden” (1981, 52).

Paterson is passionate about the healing power of great books, writing, “They are the words that integrate us, stretch us, judge us, comfort and heal us. They are the words that mirror the Word of creation, bringing order out of chaos. I believe we must try, always conscious of our own fragmentary knowledge and nature, to give our children these words” (1981, 18). She believes that great novelists do not manipulate the intellect but capture the emotions. And thus they can change people’s lives. She goes on, stating, “The longer I think about the conversion experience that is at the core of art, the more terrified I become. Because I know that, however I may fail, this is what my intent has been and must continue to be. With every book I have written there is a reader whose life I have been determined to change” (1981, 45). Asked by adults why her books are so often about difficult and dark topics, from death to war to poverty, Paterson replies, “I can not, will not, withhold from my young readers the harsh realities of human hunger and suffering and loss, but neither will I neglect to plant that stubborn seed of hope that has enabled our race to outlast wars and famines and the desecration of death” (1981, 139).

From Paterson’s words, it is easy to recognize that faith and her Christian upbringing and commitments under gird all of Paterson’s works. She taught in religious schools, her first book was a guide to religion for young people, and she has written short stories for her husband, a Presbyterian minister, to use in his Christmas services, which she published in *A Midnight Clear: Stories for the Christmas Season*. With her husband, she wrote *Images of God*, which are illustrated retellings of Biblical stories.

Paterson cites C. S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, when asked about the influence of religion on her work, saying, “The book cannot be what the writer is

not.” She goes on to say that as a Christian, therefore, “Grace and hope will inform everything I write” (Paterson 2006b).

Asked to comment on the presence—or lack of it—of Christian content in books for children and young adults, Paterson points out there are five thousand or so books published a year and we live in a post-Christian society. So, she notes, the majority of publishing authors will not be Christian. She also notes that anyone writing explicitly about their faith risks writing propaganda. As someone who cares about both her faith and a world in distress, she tries to “tell stories which will carry the words of grace and hope in their bones and sinews and not where them like fancy dress” (Paterson 2006b).

But Paterson’s faith is not a literal or fundamentalist one. She wrote a letter to her professor, Winship, about her concern that Kings College was becoming increasingly fundamental. “Maybe there are people somewhere who can claim the Bible is literally inspired, infallible, and still intellectually honest. My experience has been that there is so much fear and so little freedom wrapped up in those assertions . . .” (125–26).

Fisher says that materials Paterson has placed in the Kerlan collection suggest Paterson’s church community believed in the importance of providing a humanizing context for its young people: pages of *Jacob* are typed on the back of an announcement for a meeting at which church members would discuss homosexuality; notes about works in progress or ideas for future works can be found on the back of a “Jesus in Action” word find; an announcement for a singles retreat; a flyer providing information about a prayer renewal workshop for church leaders; and a Sunday school flyer about a lesson on “When We Are Anxious.” Based on these artifacts, Fisher states, “Certainly a mission of

Paterson's fiction is to humanize struggling children who have in some way been ostracized from the communities that surround them" (2001, 126).

Paterson describes the main theme that "spirals through her stories as a spiritual quest for the presence of God in the world" (Fisher 2001, 163). She believes that God may be manifested in the people we encounter in our daily lives, and for "each of her main characters she creates some person through whom God's presence in the world is revealed" (Fisher 2001, 163). Students may not couch their descriptions of those transformational characters in this Christian language, but they definitely understand the ways in which a Maime Trotter helps a Gilly become more her true self, or the way in which Leslie Burke's presence in his life, albeit briefly, changes Jess's understanding of himself and the world forever.

### **Writing for Children**

Today Paterson writes in her family's 1830s farmhouse, where the connecting barn was turned into a garage, and the loft over the garage, where hired hands used to stay in two rooms, has been made into one larger space. That is her study. It's not big; it has eaves, contains bookshelves, a long table for working, a desk, and a computer (McGinty 2005, 75).

What is a typical day for Paterson? She gets up very early in the morning when she is in the very early stages of a new work—she claims she has to do because she has to write while her internal critic is still asleep or she'd never get anything done. But when she is revising, she waits for that internal critic to be fully awake and functioning so she

can do her best to write a work with which her audience will want to engage and that her readers will respect (McGinty 2005, 76).

Paterson notes that it is very difficult to define the term *children's book*. She wondered, while getting lost in the allegories of that “most Japanese of all Japanese stories, *The Crane Wife*” (Yagawa 1981—she translated it), what the picture book crowd would make of it. She goes on to quote publisher Ann Durrell, who says a children's book is “anything I publish”—a book often starts out as a children's book because it's published and marketed by that arm of the publishing house that does children's books. But “a book becomes a children's book when succeeding generations of young readers claim it for themselves” (Paterson 1982, 326). Thus *The Yearling* (Rawlings 1938) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee 1960), both of which won Pulitzer prizes for adults, now are, in a very real sense children's books, which doesn't “diminish them in the least” (1982, 326). In “The Aim of the Writer Who Writes for Children,” Paterson presents, in general, her writer's perspective on her intentional decision to write for children.

Paterson references the fact that Flannery O'Connor, when asked why she writes, responded “Because I am good at it.” As Paterson notes, this response is not a very high-minded answer, but she goes on to say it is the only legitimate answer. “There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift. It is the nature of fiction not to be good for much unless it is good in itself” (1982, 326).

After winning the Newbery Medal, Paterson felt as if people then expected her to move on to something other than children's books. She wanted to cry out, “Why do I have to stop doing what I most want to do?” (1982, 326). Paterson says that her aim, like

that of most writers of fiction, is to tell a story and notes, “My gift seems to be that I am one of those fortunate people who can, if she works hard at it, uncover a story that children will enjoy” (1982, 326). It’s like Michelangelo’s gift; he could chip away at the block of marble to reveal the statue within it, and Paterson’s job, as she views it is, to zero in on those parts of a story that will help young readers respond in ways that will shape their development of identity and hope.

Because the writing process for Paterson is one of uncovering, she says she cannot answer questions like “Why is Maime Trotter fat?” Paterson admits that she does not know why Maime is semiliterate or a bad housekeeper—that’s just how Trotter was when Paterson met her. Sometimes Paterson says she has to rewrite because a book, as she writes, shows her what it is about and what its people are like. But Trotter arrived fully formed (1982, 326). Comparing herself to other well-known, critically acclaimed authors, Paterson says she can’t write “a symphonic masterpiece like Mary Lee Settle’s *Bloodtie* (1977), but I can write a simple melody like *Bridge to Terabithia* and I’m grateful that I can” (1982, 329). Her work tries to answer the questions she heard her children and their friends ask: *Is there any chance that human beings can learn to love one another? Will the world last long enough for me to grow up in it? What if I die?* And the questions they ask, but would never formulate this way, the ancient question of the psalmist as he gazed at stars millions of light years away, *What is man that thou art mindful of him?*” (1982, 329–30).

Even now, Paterson has times of self-doubt about the value of her work. “There is always for me a horrible moment just before a new novel is published when I wonder if I can stand being stripped naked still another time. Someone said to me recently that she

had read my books and now wanted to *really get to know me*. . . . Inside myself I was saying—lady, you already know me far better than you have the right to” (1989, 36). And yet, Paterson is eloquent on the point that a novel is not just her own creation. She echoes Louise Rosenblatt, in *Literature as Exploration*, when she states,

I know that without the efforts of my reader, I have accomplished nothing . . . I have not written a book for children unless the book is brought to life by the child who reads it. It is a cooperative venture. My aim is to do my job so well that the young reader will delight to be my co-author. (1982, 330–31)

Asked which book was the most fun to write, McGinty reports that Paterson indicated *Bridge to Terabithia* was the happiest, that she had the most fun with Jimmy Jo, and had the second-most joy in creating Gilly. But in other interviews Paterson has resisted picking a favorite, “saying that would be like a mother trying to pick a favorite child” (Colorado and Perkins 2006). And she notes, too, that in spite of the level of critical acclaim she has received, she still has goals for herself as a writer, saying,

I’d like to use language better. I want to be able to tell a better story. I want to reach the hearts of my readers. You always want the next book to be the best book you’ve ever written, and you never know because you haven’t written it. I think it has to do with growing as a person, because who you are is what you write and you can’t be a better writer unless you grow as a person (McGinty 2005, 28)

It is Paterson’s deep empathy for the outsider coupled with her conviction in the healing power of love and the importance of hope for the future—all of which derive from her own lived experience—that the teachers who worked on this project felt it crucial to understand as they explored Paterson’s writing with their students. They

experienced her works on a deeper, more personal level once they began to better appreciate the way the author's life shaped her writing, and once they began to see the way her works speak to one another. More of Paterson's biographical history and her insights into the nature of writing for children and young adults, joy, family, hope, and love are discussed as appropriate in the chapters of *Teaching the Selected Works of Katherine Paterson*, an attempt to document what can happen when caring, creative teachers open Paterson's world and books to their students.

(Note that all references cited in this chapter are provided in the Works Cited section of *Teaching the Selected Works of Katherine Paterson*.)