

• Meet the Author •

Margaret Read MacDonald

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).



Photo from margaretreaddmacdonald.com

Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald has written over 60 books about stories and storytellers. She loved working as a children's librarian for years, but now she travels and tells stories all over the world. Every culture has amazing stories to tell, and Margaret looks for really fun tales and puts them into books so everyone can share them. Look for her Balinese tale, *Go to Sleep Gecko*. Or her Palestinian Arab tale, *Tunjur! Tunjur!* Or the Hungarian tale, *Little Rooster's Diamond Button*. You can travel around the world in a book!

You are a storyteller and folklorist. Tell us a bit about your history with folktales.

MRM: I have been telling stories since 1965, and I loved folktales so much that I went to Indiana University to study all about them and get a doctorate in Folklore. I spend a lot of time looking through old collections of folktales, looking for

fun tales to tell. And I also spend time writing about folktales and storytellers.

Your author's note for *Bat's Big Game* refers to many versions of this folktale. How did you come to choose this particular one?

MRM: I have read many versions of this folktale. There is an Aesop fable about a war between the bats and the birds which ends with Bat being kicked out because he can't choose a side. My story is really based on that. But I liked also the idea that several Native American stories use . . . that the animals and birds are playing a stickball game. For my picture book, I combined elements of both stories. So the story as I wrote it was never told as a folktale. It is an original story made up from parts of different folktales. I always put a note "about this tale" in my books, so the reader can see what my sources are.

Bat is the main character of the story, but he is not the hero. Rather, he is a trickster, of sorts, who gets his just desserts by the end of the tale. I suspect he is an archetypal character.

MRM: Yes, it is true, there are many folktales about trick-

ster characters who end up in a sorry state. Many Native American tales are told about Coyote, for example. He is always tricking people . . . but he usually ends up in a difficult situation because of it.



On the other hand, some tricksters, like Brer Rabbit or the Malaysian mouse deer, Kantjil, always come out on top! Those are tales of small tricksters who outwit larger foes. One of my books is *Conejito*, about a little rabbit who outwits a fox, a tiger, and a lion who are trying to eat him. So there are different kinds of tricksters in stories.

How is writing the text for a folktale different from telling stories orally? As a storyteller, what changes do you have to make to suit the print format?

MRM: A picture book has just 32 pages. I have to fit the story into that format. So

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if it is a long story, I have to leave something out, shorten the tale to make it fit. If it is a short story, I can stretch it out over several pages with fewer words on each page. It is like a puzzle. I work it over and over. And also the page turns must come in just the right place. The very act of turning a page is part of the drama of picture book reading. And the words have to fit exactly with the illustrations. So when I get rough sketches for those, I paste up a book dummy and read it aloud to groups of children to see just how it sounds now. I often rewrite a picture book as many as fifty times, trying to get it just right.

Are you ever surprised when you see what an illustrator has drawn to illustrate your stories?

MRM: Sometimes I am very surprised! When I wrote a book called *Too Many Fairies*, I imagined the fairies as looking something like the fairy godmothers in Walt Disney's *Cinderella*. But when I opened the book . . . they looked like Teletubbies! The illustrator can draw whatever he or she likes. It is really a collaboration between illustrator and author to make a great picture book.

In the case of *Bat's Big Game*, I was lucky to have an illustrator who lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina. They really are wild about football there. They call soccer 'football.' So she really knew how to draw all of those soccer moves! Look closely at the pictures . . . you can see the ball zipping here and there and . . . SCORE!

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

MRM: Readers can go to my Web site, www.margaretreadmacdonald.com. There is lots of information about me and my books there! Or look in *Something About the Author*, v. 94, pp. 142-145 (Gale Research, 1998).

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of twelve picture books, most recently *Adventure Annie Goes to Kindergarten* (Dial, 2010) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

