

MEET THE AUTHOR



Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Cynthia Rylant in her home near Portland, Oregon, on August 7, 2015.



CYNTHIA RYLANT

Your contribution to the canon of children's literature includes an enormous number of beloved books, among them a Newbery Medal winner and a Newbery Honor winner. Writing for children seems to be such a natural fit for you, yet children's books were not something you had great exposure to as a child.

CR: I was raised in rural West Virginia in a coal-mining family, and when I was growing up, the idea of publishing a book one day was not something I contemplated. I didn't read many high-quality books as a child. I mostly read comic books from the drugstore, and when I was a teenager, my grandmother and I would sit in her living room and read paperback romances, and then we'd watch the soap operas together. That was pretty much my cultural training.

But I did grow up in a beautiful part of the world. It was a very remote area of West Virginia, and there was a

lot of quiet, natural beauty and practically no technology. I was outside a lot, and it was a really wonderful place to play. I've always felt that one of the best things that happened to me as a child was that I was allowed to play as much as I wanted to, and I think that freedom has made me a pretty good writer of children's books.

Many of the books you've written for children touch on themes of comfort and reassurance.

CR: *Comfort* is actually a pretty good word for what I often try to create in my books, and I think comforting and reassuring themes resonate with me because I was so protected myself when I was small.

I lived with my grandparents for close to four years. My parents had a really unhappy, tumultuous, short marriage, which produced me. My father drank, and he disappeared and never came back. My mother had to go away to nursing school, because back in those days you didn't go to college to be a nurse; you went to a hospital that had a nursing school and you lived in a dormitory with other nursing students. She'd visit when she could, but she had to leave me behind.

So, in a way, I lost both my parents at four and a half. But this actually turned out to be a blessing in my life, because the place my mother left me was down a dirt road in the heart of Appalachia with two wonderful grandparents and an assortment of cousins and aunts and uncles. There were cows in the meadow next door, and there was a little Baptist church right over the hill where my grandmother taught the Sunday school class. I walked with the other children to the school bus in the dark every morning to go to the little country school.

Everything about my world was contained. It was secure. It was predictable. I was very well fed. My grandfather had gotten hurt in the coal mine, and he couldn't work anymore, so there was a real problem with having enough money. But they

had a huge garden so I always had plenty to eat. For those years, I lived in a very nurturing environment.

I don't analyze why I write or what I write, but I do think that being rocked in that kind of cradle, where I had enough, and I felt comforted and reassured, probably had an impact on my writer's voice that made its way out of me years later.

Please talk more about your grandparents and growing up in Appalachia.

CR: My grandparents really were special. They were so humble that they probably never knew how much they did for me, or what a difference they made. When I grew up and finally had enough life experience to look back with some perspective on everything that had happened to me as a child, I brought it up with my grandmother. I remember sitting on the porch swing with her. She was getting very old; she was about ninety then, and I remember telling her that she had saved me. And in typical fashion she said, "Oh, no, I should have been much better. I should have done a better job." But I reassured her that she absolutely did save me.

So those are my roots, those people and that place. I actually still have a bit of an accent from the time I lived there, to the point where people ask me where I'm from. My accent gets thicker when I'm mad. If you get me mad, I really sound like a hillbilly. I use that term very affectionately—I'm really proud to be a hillbilly. For me, the word *hillbilly* refers to anybody who grew up in the more isolated parts of Appalachia. A lot of people think that the word refers to someone who is ignorant, but I've never associated it that way. It just means that you're a mountain person, removed from the rest of the world. And that's what I am, or was, growing up.

You've lived outside of Appalachia for many years now, but you still seem deeply connected to the region.

CR: I'm still connected to it. I've been going back to West Virginia once or twice a year ever since I left. My mom is still alive and now lives in an assisted living place, but she still owns a trailer right down the dirt road from the Baptist church where my grandmother taught her Sunday school classes. And somebody rents the trailer and takes care of the cat that belongs to my mom.

When I go back . . . I don't really know how to explain it, when I go back. There are things that remain the same—smells that I will always associate with that place, like a skillet of cornbread being pulled from the oven. People still eat a lot of cornbread there, and hot buttermilk biscuits for breakfast. Then there's the smell of honeysuckle along the dirt roads, amazing in the summertime.

There's a part of me that feels lonely because I'm not part of things there anymore, and there's a part of me that feels guilty I left. And there's a part of me that knows I received what I needed to from that area and from my hometown and from my culture. And then it was time for me to step forward into different life experiences.

What was your school experience like when you were young?

CR: I went to a small elementary school. I remember the smell of hot rolls being baked in the kitchen by the countrywomen who would come in and cook for us. For me, that scent will always be associated with elementary school, which was the place where you get really good hot food and people are nice to you.

I understand that, these days, schools are very intense. There is a lot of testing, and some parents push their

kids to make it to the top and start grooming them for success at a very young age. It saddens me to think about that happening because I really think that the most important job children have is to play, and to be children.

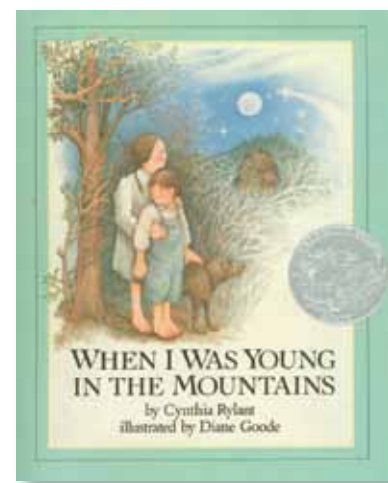
I feel lucky that when I was growing up, the schools I attended were very quiet and tidy, and we got plenty of recess, and we got good hot lunches. And then when we went home at the end of the day, we weren't stressed out by tons of homework. We actually got to continue just being children.

That was my school experience. I was never afraid of school, and I don't ever remember going home after school feeling tremendous anxiety.

When you grew up, you obviously became a writer. But you were also a teacher and a librarian. What steered you in the direction of the library?

CR: When I was in high school, my only plan was to marry my high school boyfriend and set up a house trailer on his parents' land and live there for the rest of my life. I was very smart, but I didn't think I had any other options.

Fortunately, though, my father had been in the military, and because of certain military benefits, the US government was willing to help me go to college through the Veterans' Administration



program. So I actually was able to go to college, and I attended a small school in West Virginia that was about an hour and a half from where I grew up.

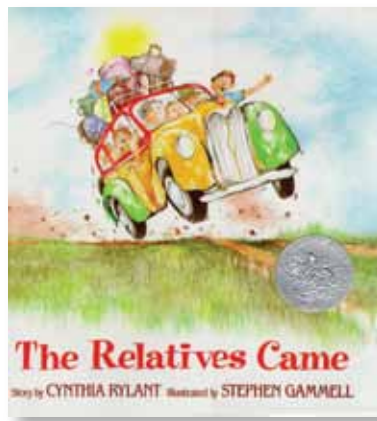
When I started school, I didn't know what field I'd enter when I graduated. Initially I thought I wanted to be a nurse like my mom. But I signed up for an English class my first semester, and I fell in love with the stories I was reading. I changed my major to English right away. After I received my English degree, though, I still didn't know what to do with myself, so I got a scholarship to go on to graduate school in English to study more literature. It was during that period that I discovered children's books for the first time.

Growing up, I had never heard of anything like *Charlotte's Web* or *Make Way for Ducklings*. But when I finished my degree and couldn't find a job, I was working as a waitress and somebody asked me if I'd ever thought about working at the public library. I actually had never used the public library—which is kind of amazing, since I had these English degrees—but I didn't grow up near a public library, so I didn't really know what one was. Even so, I went over to the public library in Huntington, West Virginia, and I applied for a job as a clerk at minimum wage, and I ended up being put in the children's department.

That's where my life completely changed. I'd bring bags and bags of children's books home to read every day. I couldn't believe how beautiful they were, and I couldn't believe this world of beauty existed and I knew nothing about it. I was absolutely enchanted.

Please talk about your first writing experience. What prompted you to take the leap to writing your own stories?

CR: During the time when I was working as a clerk in the library and taking stacks of children's books home



every day, I read a beautiful picture book called *Ox-Cart Man* by Donald Hall. I think it was set in the 1800s or so, and it was about a man who walked his ox to the market and then back home. It was such a simple story, with such lovely language. That was the book that made me think maybe I could write a picture book myself.

One day I sat down with a piece of paper and I started writing. I wrote that when I was young in the mountains, grandfather came home in the evening covered with the black dust of the coal mine. Only his lips were clean, and he used them to kiss the top of my head. That was the first line that came out of me, and it led to my first picture book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. I wrote it in a matter of minutes. It just flowed out of me like a river.

It was 1978, and at the time I didn't know anything about how to get a book published. So I went to a store that sold a book called *The Writer's Market*, and I bought a copy. In that book I found publishers' addresses. I then typed up that little story, and I sent it out to a handful of publishers. Amazingly, a couple of months later, an editor from one of the publishers wrote to me and said, "We loved this story and we want to publish it." And that was the beginning of my life as a writer. I didn't stop writing after that.

***Ox-Cart Man*, the picture book that inspired you to start writing, was a Caldecott winner. Your very first picture book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, won a Caldecott**

honor. The award is for illustrations, but of course the illustrations are inspired by a great text.

CR: The illustrator of *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, Diane Goode, is wonderful, and she and I were really lucky to be paired together.

***The Relatives Came*, illustrated by Stephen Gammell, is another Caldecott-honor winner you wrote that touches on experiences you had growing up in West Virginia.**

CR: I wrote *The Relatives Came* on the heels of *When I Was Young in the Mountains*; it was a period when I was writing picture books about my childhood. *The Relatives Came* is a true story. When I was living in Cool Ridge, West Virginia, with my grandparents, these relatives from Virginia used to come visit every summer. Back then we didn't have freeways, so they had to drive their old car up and over all these curvy, curvy mountain roads to get to us. It took a long time.

There were a whole bunch of them who would show up, and when they finally arrived, they stayed for about a month or so. I remember there was a lot of cooking and canning and eating, and my grandparents and the relatives would play cards at night around the old round oak table in the kitchen. And they'd just laugh and tell stories, and reminisce about their lives and the crazy things they did when they were younger.

Everything was alive and everything smelled good, and there was lots of laughter and affection—just incredible affection. That's why I mention in the book all the hugging in the house that goes on when the relatives are there, because that's the way it was. And children really were invited to be a part of things. They weren't told to go elsewhere. They were welcomed, and as a child, you truly felt loved and wanted. It's from those memories that this story was born.

You've described the experience of writing as words flowing out of you like a river. Please elaborate on your writing process.

CR: I've never really had a plan for my writing. I don't really have a schedule. I still write the same way I always have, from my very first story, which is to write based on what's inspiring me.

Inspiration comes and goes, and I've done my best writing when I've waited for that inspiration—when I haven't done any writing at all because I'm just waiting to see what happens. I can go months and months without writing while I wait for inspiration. And then next thing I know, I'm grabbing a piece of paper and sitting down to work. I'm always kind of amazed when a book just seems to show up; it comes out of my head so fast.

When I'm not writing, I just live a quiet life. I keep a sweet house, and I've always had pets, and I raised a child, but it's a quiet life. It's not a life under pressure, and I think that's also helped my writing. I always thought, *Well, I can go back to part-time teaching if I have to*, but I've been lucky. My books seem to be useful, especially for children learning how to read, and I think that's one reason most of them have remained in print. They're not thrill-of-the-moment kinds of books; they're more about simple experiences. I haven't lived an exotic life, so if I'm going to write, it's more likely to be about somebody with a cat, making a pot of tea. It's going to be about life at home.

Your novel, *Missing May*, won the Newbery Award. What inspired this story?

CR: *Missing May* is set in my home state of West Virginia, and it has a lot of elements from my early life in it—especially with regard to the kinds of characters who populate it, and the lives they lead. Often when I'm finished writing a book I can look at it later and say, "Oh yeah, that part of the book or

that character is just like something or someone I knew in my life." For example, Cletus, who's Summer's friend in *Missing May*, is a really eccentric kid, and he's a bit of a doofus. But he also has this beautiful, intuitive sense of compassion. I knew many people like him—adults and kids—back when I was going to school in West Virginia. At first, their eccentricities might lead some people to call them crazy, but underneath, they know things and see things that others don't. They're magicians, and not fully appreciated.

There are also themes in the book that I experienced growing up, including the loss of a parent and the loving nature that elderly people can show to a child. Obviously, the book came from a place deep inside me, and I think a lot of writers would say that about their work.

As for the plot, I don't know really where the story came from. It just came to me one day, and I just started writing, page to page to page, until it was finally finished.

You are the author of several series including *The Lighthouse Family*, the *Mr. Putter and Tabby* books, and *Henry and Mudge*. Are you aware, when a book idea comes to you and you sit down to write it, that it is actually going to be the first in a series?

CR: Sometimes I make a conscious decision to write a series, like the *Lighthouse Family* books. In those cases, it's kind of a thought that comes to me that says, "I'd like to write a few books about these people." Other times, I've been invited by my editor to write a series.

With *Mr. Putter and Tabby*, I originally thought that I might have four or five books about them, but now I don't even know how many there are. Maybe twenty? I just kept going. I love those two so much; the old man and his old cat and the life they share together.

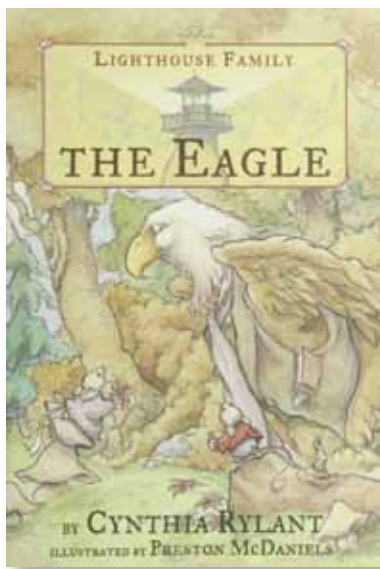
He's such a good guy, Mr. Putter, and Tabby is such an angel to him, and Mrs. Teaberry next door and Zeke . . . they're all so good. You just wish you could be like them and that you lived in their world. So I love going back to that world. I have a kid's sense of humor, and the same things that make children giggle are the things that make me giggle. Also, I have a pretty childlike, joyful, playful relationship with my pets, so that comes out in the *Mr. Putter and Tabby* books, too—especially with Tabby and Zeke and their adventures.

With the characters of *Henry and Mudge*, they were another set of characters that I could actually envision in a series. I was inspired to try to write the series because I was so in love with Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* books. I just think those *Frog and Toad* stories are masterpieces of good writing. There's so much character development and so much wry wisdom about life and relationships. I admired them so much that I read them over and over, as well as *Owl at Home* and *Uncle Elephant*. I learned about how beginning readers worked. And, finally, I decided to write my own, and I wanted it to be about a boy and his dog. My son was seven years old at the time, the same age as Henry, and we had our own dog, so I sat down to write a classic, boy-dog dilemma story. From there, the series blossomed.

Your *Brownie and Pearl* series is about a little girl and her cat, and the two of them have very wonderful, defined personalities.

CR: I didn't think or plan too much about *Brownie and Pearl* before I started writing their stories, but I do remember that I wanted *Brownie* to be about four years old, and I wanted her to be a little jazzy. In the end, she is—and she's curious and inquisitive, and she's up for trying new things. *Pearl* is her patient and loving companion who seems way older and wiser than *Brownie*.

With these characters especially, it mattered a great deal to me who



illustrated them, because the illustrator really had to be someone who could capture that spark that's at the heart of Brownie's character. When my editor found Brian Biggs, and he drew what Brownie and Pearl looked like to him in his head, they were just perfect. I think it's really because of him that the series has been so successful.

So many of your books feature animals. What is it that draws you to animals, both as characters and as companions?

CR: A lot of people out there love animals, so I'm in a big club in that respect. I think my love for animals stems from not having any brothers and sisters, and from my son being an only child. I remember when he was small, and it was just the two of us, I wanted him to feel like he was part of a big family. So I started bringing home animals—dogs and cats and a hamster and a parakeet and a big tank of goldfish and a guinea pig . . . whatever I could find to make him feel like we were not alone.

There's something really great about coming home and being greeted by a pet. They're just so happy to see you. And when you get up in the morning, they're really happy to start the day, which changes everything if it's just you living by yourself. I really appreciate how much animals love life, and I think they help people love life more, too, when they're living in a house with you.

What is a typical day like for you?

CR: I don't have a typical workday, exactly, because I don't write on any kind of schedule. I know there are people who write every day, and they keep lots of notes and story ideas in their desks, and they're always working on something. But that's not how I function best. So I don't have typical writing days; I just have normal days. I get up and I have tea and toast, and I feed my pets, and then maybe I tidy up the house or go to the market or see a friend or get the car washed. Maybe I'll write a letter to somebody far away who I'm missing. These are my normal days.

And sometimes during the course of one of those normal days, I might have a moment where a story idea will come into my mind, and if it does, then I will pick up my yellow writing pad, and I'll grab a pen and sit down, and I'll wait for a minute and see what line comes into my head. If I can just get that first line, that key opening sentence, then everything after that is easy. The hardest part for me is getting the first line.

I wrote a Mr. Putter and Tabby story called *Mr. Putter and Tabby Write the Book*, and in it Mr. Putter decides he's going to write a book, but every time

he sits down to write, he thinks of a new snack he can make in the kitchen and he goes to do just that. That's sort of me, and what I do when I feel overwhelmed with trying to write a book. When I feel like I can't make it wonderful, and the words aren't flowing, I go find something to do in the kitchen, like make a cup of tea and have a cookie.



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