

• Meet the Author •

Grades
PK–6

Mary Pope Osborne

Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Mary Pope Osborne in her Connecticut home on May 28, 2013.



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You are the author of the bestselling *Magic Tree House* series and many picture books and YA novels besides. But long before you became an award-winning author for children, you were a traveler. What was your life like growing up?

MPO: I grew up in a military family with two brothers and a sister, and our family moved constantly. But we had each other and our imaginations, and I think that combination made for a wonderful childhood. I feel very blessed to have had all the travel experiences I had, but I'm not sure they would've been so fantastic without our little posse, where we could be with each other and not mind having to move and lose friends. The moving brought us closer together, because we could count on each other. My memories about the fun we used to have are sublime. We're all still very close.

Did moving a lot as a child in any way inspire your writing down the road?

MPO: My father only had one overseas assignment when I was young. We were in Salzburg, Austria, for three years, and it was a place that was elemental in the creation of my imagination. I was four or five at the time, and we lived across the street from a castle. It seemed that everything around us could have been in a book of fairy tales—which I was also being exposed to for the first time then. My memories from that period all mingle in my mind, and sometimes I have trouble remembering whether a recollection is an actual experience I had, or whether it came from a book I read.

I think the mental ability to step into antique, atmospheric environments developed early in me, and it's been continuously fed by a life of writing children's books. In fact, I think the blueprint for writing *Magic Tree House* was created by this childhood of moving so often and having to create new realities for myself—to believe that adventure was always around the corner.

You grew up loving the theater as well as books. How did that come about?

MPO: My dad retired from the military just as I was entering high school, and he did so in a small southern town near the army post we had just

lived on. It was a challenge for me, suddenly being out of the military lifestyle, because I had to find other ways to express myself and to feel that I belonged.

I found that sense of belonging in a little local theater within walking distance of our house. My parents were wonderful about letting me go there after school and on weekends, and all through the summer to perform in plays or work backstage. We were doing all these Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller plays—wonderful shows where the poetry of the language sort of took hold inside of me. I fell as much in love with language as I did with performance. I think that experience was the fuel I needed to catapult myself into a life in the arts. It enriched my imagination and gave me the confidence to use it.

The *Magic Tree House* series has exposed thousands of young readers to ideas and information about people and places across time. How did this theme of cultural exploration become important to you?

MPO: I went to college to study theater. But in the middle of my college years, I discovered religion and philosophy. I'd never been exposed to that

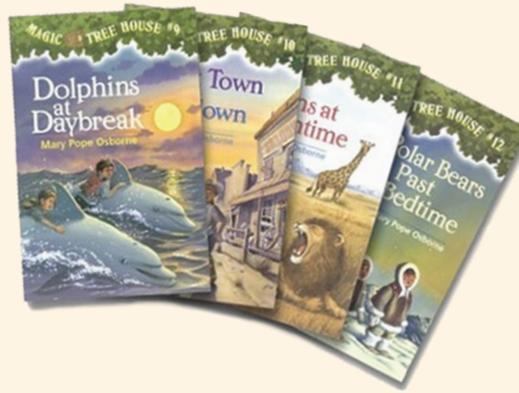
kind of challenging thinking before, and I found Tolstoy and Freud and Reinhold Niebuhr so stimulating that I transferred my major to the religion department and started writing poetry, thinking of it as a creative adjunct to my philosophical studies.

When I graduated, I was restless and I wanted to see the world. This was the early seventies, when you could literally put a pack on your back and a few hundred dollars in your pocket and go over to Europe and beyond—and that's what I did. I spent about a year traveling through countries like, believe it or not, Syria and Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, Iraq and Iran and Nepal.

I saw the world, and I later saw the way that it changed so drastically, because by the end of the seventies there were revolutions and borders were closed. But before then, I was a part of this crusade of young adults who were going to the East, and that experience imprinted on me deeply and indelibly. It was fuel for poetry when I returned to the States, and it fueled in me the need to write about faraway places.

Your husband, Will, is an artist, a frequent collaborator on the Magic Tree House series, and a longtime champion of your writing. Please talk a bit about your relationship and how he has encouraged your creative efforts.

MPO: Our relationship was meant to be—it's an example of why people say timing is everything. I'd been working in Washington, DC, and one



day a friend called and said, “There’s a show playing called *Diamond Studs* with some of the people we went to school with.” I hadn’t been planning to attend, but I ended up going opening night. I don’t know how to explain it, but I saw Will walk onstage and I was in love by the end of the show. I went backstage to meet him and found out we’d actually known each other in college.

We started seeing each other there in Washington, and within a year, we married in New York. And that was really the beginning of a whole new creative phase for me. I had so much emotional support from him and encouragement to start writing. He loved my writing. He wanted to hear more of it every day, and I give him the credit for getting me to really start in earnest.

We lived in the Village in a sixth-floor tenement walk-up on Bleecker Street, and we used to take walks in Washington Square at twilight and talk about what we wanted out of life. And we made a decision the summer we were twenty-nine that we would never let the other do anything but be an artist. Will was—and still is—a writer and musician and actor, and I was considering myself a writer. And we managed to

stick to our contract. Within a year or two, I sold my first book, and he started getting commercials and parts in theaters. From the time we were thirty on, we never had to do much else than be in the theater or write. It was not without sacrifices—we lived in that tenement for seventeen years and climbed those six flights of stairs. We never had a family. We pretty much lived hand-to-mouth for many years. We didn’t start to really prosper until our late forties, and by then, we had mapped out a life that was very enjoyable on a small budget. I wrote fifty other books besides *Magic Tree House*, and I would still be struggling today with the economics of being a writer if I had not had this amazingly lucky success with *Magic Tree House*.

What led you to write the Magic Tree House series?

MPO: Throughout my thirties, I was writing everything from young adult novels to picture books, retellings of mythology and medieval tales to American tall tales and Norse tales. I was interested in everything, and I wanted to learn so much. I had a love for history—my historical knowledge was all self-taught—and I had a love for sibling

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relationships, because mine had meant so much to me. I loved magic—the idea of some kind of enchantment in our lives. I wondered what would happen if I combined these interests, so I played with the idea.

I had a young editor at Random House who was sort of in the sandbox with me, but nothing we talked about was working. I tried a magic cellar and magic art studio, magic whistles and a magic museum. I was floundering. I was really about to give up. But then my husband and I took a walk, and we saw a tree house, and we started batting around the idea of a magic tree house. I tell kids when I talk about this that the simplest ideas can be the hardest to find.

Please explain the premise of the Magic Tree House stories.

MPO: In the first book of the Magic Tree House series, a brother and sister live a quiet, nice life in a small town in Pennsylvania. One day they find a mysterious tree house in the Frog Creek Woods. They climb the ladder, and find the tree house is filled with books. The boy, especially, loves books, and after picking up one about dinosaurs he kind of offhandedly makes a wish that they could go to that place and time. The next thing you know, the wind starts to blow, the tree house is spinning, and it lands in the time of dinosaurs. The siblings have this scary and wondrous adventure.

In the second book, they go to a castle in medieval England; the third, they go to a pyramid in Egypt, and in the fourth, they experience pirates

of the Caribbean. I write the books in quartets, and there is a tremendous amount of planning I have to do before writing a new quartet to ensure that one book is going to link with another. There are clues throughout each quartet, so by the time the reader reaches the end of the fourth book, some great truth of life is revealed by a wise person. Jack and Annie's missions are determined by these adult people who ask them to do things to help set the world right. So, without being didactic, I hope, the books give a strong sense of morals.

What are some of the reasons you think the Magic Tree House series appeals to young readers?

MPO: Jack and Annie, the brother and sister in the stories, started their adventures at only at seven and eight years old. Now they're about ten and eleven, and they are still going on missions in all the quartets. Even though they have aged, they still experience the world at a child's eye-level. Their journeys are never so fantastical that they're not still just children. I think that's why kids love Jack and Annie, because they feel they could be them. At the same time, these readers are solving little mysteries and accomplishing missions, too, so that by the end of each quartet, they've also put together a puzzle of sorts.

The Magic Tree House series has sold millions of copies worldwide and has been translated into more than thirty languages. At what point did you realize the books, and

the concept behind them, were resonating with readers on a large scale?

MPO: After the first two or three books, I started getting letters. That had never happened to me before, where I got these adorable letters from little kids telling me how much the books meant to them. Beyond that, I got letters from parents and teachers saying things like, "Sam couldn't read until he picked up this chapter book," or "Katie never liked to read until she picked up this chapter book."

At that point—not to sound too high-minded—but things really went from a commercial venture to a calling. I had always thought this was not my most artistic expression; in my early years, I'd wanted to be a poet. I wanted to write offbeat novels. To write a series that was so consistent, and geared toward such a young age group, made me think, "This will be fun ... it may make money. It's a good gig, but it's temporary."

And then my whole life changed when I got these responses. They grew and grew until thousands of letters were coming in and lots of kids were learning to read on the Magic Tree House books. And then I said, "Okay, what could be better?" The creative challenge became really stimulating.

Now that you are more than two decades and fifty Magic Tree House books into the mission, can you reflect on how your writing process may have changed since you first began the series?

MPO: Over time, I think I've gotten better at writing the

Magic Tree House books. I've gotten better at being more eloquent in a simple way—moving the action along with a few strokes, almost like Japanese brushstrokes. I started asking myself, “How can I say this simply and swiftly, but deeply?” I don't analyze every sentence like that, but it is always satisfying to come up with the right one- or two-syllable word that is alive, a living word.

I also play around a lot with the senses and weather and light. I try to pull readers down into the reality I'm creating, almost in a haiku kind of way, and then push them forward with adventure and cliffhangers. Over time, I found a way to make the stories even more meaningful to me because I began to explore my love of language through the books, as well as my love for hooking a reader and telling a story.

The twenty-ninth Magic Tree House book is the start of the Merlin Missions. Please talk about this development in the series.

MPO: After twenty-eight of the first Magic Tree House books, my editor and I wondered if we could make things a little more challenging. What if we bumped up the reading level, made the books twice as long with more plot and depth, and increased Jack and Annie's ages? Kids can stay with the books longer, and I can explore a wider subject range and have a little more fun.

That was more than ten years ago, and I've been doing only Merlin Missions since—though it's possible that I might bump the series up yet one more level to be a little more challenging.

The Magic Tree House series introduces a great deal of factual information to readers. How do you conduct research and work it into your books?

MPO: There is definitely a lot of research, and I bury myself in it. That's most of the work I do. I might get anywhere from ten to twenty books on a subject, and I do Internet research, too. I take copious notes, and I begin to craft a plot out of the research, because it's almost as if there's a hidden story in every subject I explore. Sometimes I come across some wonderful connections.

One of the most magical examples of this happened to me when I wanted to write about Jack and Annie attending a concert given by a six-year-old Mozart at the Palace of Schönbrunn in Vienna. I needed an exciting cover for the book, so I was reading about *The Magic Flute* for inspiration. The only childlike scene in the whole opera is when a great herd of animals is led by a flute. So I said to my editor, “Somehow I've got to get wild animals into this palace, because I want them on the cover, and I want them to be led by Jack playing the flute.” I thought I'd have to invent the animals through some magic device, but as I kept researching, I found out that ten years before Mozart was there, Schönbrunn Palace housed the first private zoo in the world. Can you imagine how blown away I was? I was able to write the zoo outside the palace, and have little Mozart, because he's in a tantrum, let the animals loose. Believe it or not, this sort of historical and

factual serendipity happens over and over again.

The Magic Tree House books are told from the boy's point of view. How does that influence the way you portray his sister?

MPO: Telling the books through the point of view of the boy kind of liberates me to brag about the girl. I didn't want to be a revisionist when writing about historical places and times, so I'm pretty honest about things like the way women were treated during the ancient Olympics or Victorian England. The siblings run up against a lot of challenges where Annie has to disguise herself or take a backseat in a situation.

But I always make sure it's clear that that's what's going on, and I make sure the characters discuss it, because I want readers to really look at the situation and think about the fact that Annie is a strong, outgoing little girl who could meet any challenge, but she's often denied the opportunity unless she's disguising who she is.

Also, men tend to outnumber women in the history books, so it's not always easy for me to portray historical male and female figures evenly. But I'm hoping that the lopsided presence of historical male heroes is compensated by Annie's heroism in every single story.

In the end, boy readers do not resist Annie. They love Annie. They roll their eyes about Annie. “Oh, boy, she's a handful,” one little boy said to me once—which makes me think these boys may see some of their own sisters in Annie. And the girls enjoy Annie too. So even if the subjects the

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books cover lean a little more toward more masculine topics, I hope I'm giving credit both to male and female characters. It's something I've thought a lot about.

Please talk about your Classroom Adventures Program.

MPO: In all the years of writing the Magic Tree House series, I have been helped by phenomenal teachers and educators, who, for me, were really responsible for the books' success. They shared the books with each other. They bought them for their classrooms. They identified the books' value in terms of literacy and learning.

My husband and I were looking for a way to give back, so for the twentieth anniversary of the series, we formed the Classroom Adventures Program for teachers, which provides teachers with lesson plans and reading level guides with core curriculum tie-ins for all the books, free of charge. And if you're a Title I school, we are giving books away. We've recruited a great team of educators to develop these materials for us, many of whom are past winners of the Magic Tree House Teacher of the Year Award.

In the year and a half since we started, we've had a phenomenal response, and we've been able to start going out into communities, ourselves. We went Newark last year, and we gave away four thousand boxed sets of twenty-eight books. I thought that giving just one book to a child might not change much, but a box

of twenty-eight books might make a real difference to a young person who doesn't really have books. So we gave a box of books to every third grader in Newark.

More recently, we gave away a thousand boxes of books in New Orleans, which happened in conjunction with a show my husband wrote with the great jazz and blues musician Allen Toussaint, based on my Magic Tree House book about Louis Armstrong, *A Good Night for Ghosts*. The idea behind the show is to bring jazz to inner-city kids, and to make them feel that they can make music as well as learn to read. We had local kids, both in Newark and in New Orleans, perform the show, and other school kids attended free of charge and were given their books.

Now that the Classroom Adventures Program is taking off, we feel we've got a really exciting future mapped out: while I keep writing, we're going to be giving away more and more materials to educators and to kids in order to add some fun to a teacher's curriculum. That's our real mission now, and it seems like a perfect extension of the last twenty years of writing the books.

The Magic Tree House is not your only series.

MPO: Oh yes, there was also *Spider Kane and the Mystery of Under the May-Apple* and *Spider Kane and the Mystery at Jumbo Nightcrawler's Supper Club*. I had an incredibly wonderful time with the Spider Kane mysteries, and at the time I thought I'd be writing a much longer series,

but then Tree House kind of butted its way in and I never got back to those bugs.

I also did a six-part series of *The Odyssey* for kids, and I learned so much from the experience. It's deep in my bones now, that story. I took all the translations I could find and put them side by side. I had them in cookbook holders, and I'd read the same page of each translation and find what spoke to me and then retell it for kids.

Between all your Magic Tree House book writing, you've also written picture books, YA and other middle-grade novels, such as *Adaline Falling Star*.

MPO: Of all the books I've ever written, *Adaline Falling Star* is closest to my heart. You know, she's still out there somewhere with that dog, and I'm still mourning and loving them both.

I came across her story when I read a little footnote in history about Kit Carson having a half Arapaho daughter, and how he sent her to live with relatives in St. Louis when her mother died. She was always a wild girl, and she died young at nineteen.

For some reason, her story spoke to me. And after a lot of research, I started to enter her world, and I started to be able to imagine her experience of being caught in St. Louis—an unwanted little “half-breed,” as they called them then—and what it must have been like, trying to find the intersection between the spiritual world of the Lakota and the western world of her father.



In many ways, that book was the most challenging and the most rewarding I've ever written. One of the Dear America books I wrote, *Standing in the Light*, follows a similar paradigm in that I had a Quaker girl in the late 1700s kidnapped by the Delaware Indians, the Lenape. She falls in love with a young brave and must contend with her conflicting emotions about her old world and the new culture she's learning to embrace. In writing these books, I found myself wondering whether we could have done it another way when we settled—how could we have lived more harmoniously with the cultures that were already established?

Please talk about some of your more memorable picture book-writing experiences.

MPO: Many of my picture books, like *Moonhorse* and *Molly and the Prince*, were really written like poems. And *A Visit to Sleep's House* was actually inspired by a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about the home of the God Sleep. *The Visit to Sleep's House* is so beautifully written by Ovid that it inspired me to take some of that

language and work it into the story of a child going to bed. So those picture books, for me, were poetry, plain and simple.

One picture book that is especially close to my heart is *New York's Bravest*. I had written about the 1800s tall tale hero, Mose the volunteer fireman, in a previous picture book called *American Tall Tales*. The week after 9/11, my editor called and asked if I could recast the story. So I did, and *New York's Bravest* is dedicated to all the firefighters who died on September 11, 2001. Although Mose died, he's resurrected in a kind of mystical way through New Yorkers' imaginations.

New York's Bravest was illustrated by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher in the most magnificent way. It was published the year after 9/11, and I took it around the country to various conferences. I showed the entire book on big screens, and it was very cathartic. I showed it to New York City librarians, and we all wept together. Sometimes it's read at schools on the anniversary of 9/11. It remains a very meaningful book to me.

***American Tall Tales* features a lot of language unique to America.**

MPO: That was a really fun book. The language of the American tall tales is a beautiful and original way of speaking that found its way onto the scene in the 1800s. Until then, we had more of a European sensibility to our language. But in the 1800s, the woodsmen began talking and telling stories, and these old, anonymously written almanacs called the *Davy Crockett Almanacs* became more widespread, and a sort of crazy language full of bravado and exaggerated hyperbole found its way out of the American backwoods.

I found volumes of these almanacs, and I began writing words and phrases down. I immersed myself in their vernacular, and then I started going back to the tall tales to combine my own two cents with the stories as they were first laid down. It was an exuberant process.

With all the subjects you cover in your writing, do you ever get writer's block?

MPO: I never ever think of it as writer's block. And I tell kids to never say those words to me, because I feel like it becomes

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such an excuse—a condition—and it's so self-involved. When I get stuck, I just take a break. You know, I make a cup of tea. I roll on the floor with the dog. I take a walk outside. I just take tons of breaks, and when I come back, I'm unstuck.

Do you have a typical workday?

MPO: No two days of my life have been the same in 64 years. Every day is different. Somehow I keep deadlines in my mind, and they get met. Some days, no work gets done; some days, I put in hours and hours. I've never disciplined myself by saying, It's now or never. I just listen to my internal clock.

You get to talk to kids a lot. Is there something in particular you like to tell them?

MPO: I like to ask kids questions about themselves. They're usually shy at first, and then they just open up. It's almost inevitable. I talked to a little boy the other day who happened to be homeless, and at first, he was quite shy. Then suddenly, when he realized that I wasn't someone to fear, he started telling me about a story he'd like to write about a cow named Frank. And he could not stop talking about the cow named Frank. It was a sublime moment.

I feel that if I can elicit from a child a story from their innermost creative selves, I get so much more from that interaction than I could ever give. And I'm telling you, every seven- and eight-year-old out there has something original to say.

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