



Patricia McKissack

Author Program In-depth Interview

Patricia McKissack, interviewed from her home in St. Louis, Missouri on May 9, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Invariably, many of your books begin or end with a description of your childhood evenings spent on the porch listening to your grandparents tell stories. What did you learn from those experiences?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: Long before I ever thought about writing, I was a listener. We're not taught listening — that's something that you learn by doing.

I grew up listening to my mother, my grandparents, relatives and friends telling stories. My mother used to recite the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. My grandmother told scary stories, and my grandfather told stories about children who could outsmart foxes and capture the wind. We used to porch sit a lot in the South, and people would see you and stop by and have a word or two and sometimes it would evolve into a story, "Do you remember when..." or, "Girl, do you know what ever happened to..."? And that would lead into a story.

Although we children were not allowed to participate in adult conversations, when it was storytelling time, we were welcomed within the circle of adults. That was always a very special time when the whole family was involved in telling stories.

TEACHINGBOOKS: As a child, you heard stories like those you included in *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural* and *Porch Lies: Tales of Slicksters, Tricksters, and other Wily Characters*.

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: Yes a lot of my stories come from childhood memories. *Porch Lies* kind of evolved out of listening to those stories and having them come back to me. I had snippets or one-liners, but I couldn't make a complete book out of them. So, I wrapped a longer story around the snippets.

In the *Porch Lies* stories about Cake Norris, for example, nobody knows how Cake Norris died. They just know one day he "woke up dead." I remember hearing that saying and I was so tickled with it, I had to use it. My grandfather's nickname was "Cake," because his mom would make cake, and he would cut a slice of it while it was still warm.

My father always had a \$100 bill in his pocket, always. The day he died, it was still in there. He never spent it. He said it was his emergency money. That's because one time he was without a dime. He didn't have money enough to buy me a little carton of milk when we were at the bus station in Montgomery, Alabama. The cook in the restaurant there handed him a carton of milk out the back door for me. My father promised himself he would never be that broke again in life, and he never was. So that got woven into the story called "Change" in *Porch Lies*.

Then there is the story about Link Murphy and Mis Crickett. One of my uncles got a job chauffeuring a rich lady around town. When he asked about working for her, she asked him, "How do I know I can trust you?" And he said, "Well, ma'am, you just have to take my word for it." And then she said something else to him, and he said, "Well, how do I know I can trust you?" And she

looked at him right funny, and they became good friends. And she always rode up front. She did not ride in the back, and that was scandalous. In the South — in the 30s — that was unheard of.

So I knew these bits of stories and I built more complete stories around them for *Porch Lies*. That's how I work a lot of times.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write your book, *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural*, winner of the Coretta Scott King Author Award and Newbery Honor?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: When I was a child, the 30 minutes just before it got all the way dark was what we called the dark-thirty. During this time, my grandmother would tell us scary stories.

The Dark-Thirty came about because I write a lot of nonfiction, and my husband Fred and I do a lot of research. When a nonfiction book is completed, I have scraps of wonderful research left over, because there are many parts of the story that I couldn't tell in the nonfiction.

One day, I was looking at all the leftover research and remembering those wonderful stories my grandmother used to tell, and I said, "This would be a great opportunity to build on some of this research that I've done, like the *Dark-Thirty* stories "11:59" (relating to the story of the Pullman porters) or "The Legend of Pin Oak" (based on incidents in African—American history).

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of the characters in your books are heroes.

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: Yes. I want readers to come away with a sense of, "I know this person, and I like this person, and these are the qualities that I like about this person": honesty, bravery, or concern for other people — virtues. No one can have all of them, but you can have some. But every hero has a flaw. No one's perfect. Heroes must experience fear and other things that you do not usually acquaint with heroes. I try to show kids that it's okay if you make a mistake or if things do not always come out perfectly. I try to make heroes human.

Biographers made the founding fathers seem like they were men who were without a single flaw in their character. I mean nothing: they never even spoke out of place. They seemed like cardboard cutout figures, and didn't feel human to me.

But when I started reading about Benjamin Franklin and all of his shenanigans, I just fell in love with him. I said, "Oh, this is my kind of guy. I like him." And he suddenly became a hero for me. He was more human, and it made me think that maybe I could be a hero one day too.

That's what I try to do in my biographies. I try to show a three dimensional picture of the people I'm writing about, and not a cookie stamp or cardboard cutout.

For so long, there were very few stories about African-American heroes, in books that children could read and say, "Oh, that's a person I can emulate, or that's a person I can hold up as a model for what I want to be." And notice I didn't say *black* children. I said *children* because a black hero can be a hero for a white child as well a white can be for a black.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your experience of heroes growing up?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I admire Frederick Douglass's determination and strength of character. I admire his desire to be free at a great cost to his own personal safety. When he ran away as a sailor, if he had been caught, he would have been probably jailed or severely beaten, maybe even crippled or maimed to keep him from running. When he got free, he did not just go into quiet exile. He came out and wrote and spoke against slavery and became one of the strongest

opponents to slavery and the slavery issue. Douglass later became an African-American leader of great prominence. He was a statesman and a sought after speaker, yet he always maintained the common touch. He would love to play his fiddle and dance and tell stories to his grandchildren. I enjoyed reading about him.

In my all-black school, everything was a teaching opportunity for my teacher, Mrs. Washington. We all dressed up as characters that we had studied, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and others. Halloween was not just an opportunity to dress up like a mummy or a princess. It was a chance to dress up as a real character and talk about your character.

So, when I started sixth grade at a newly integrated school, I took that idea with me. No one knew whom I was dressed as, asking, "Who are you? The rag lady?" I said, "No, I'm Harriet Tubman." Would you believe even my own teacher didn't know who Harriet Tubman was?

But one good thing about my teacher, Elise Harvey, was that she allowed me to express myself and to introduce my character. She even asked me to write a paragraph about Harriet Tubman, and she printed it in a weekly take-home sheet.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share more about that special teacher you had during your first year of school integration.

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I will remember Elise Harvey all the days of my life. She was there during a very difficult period for me. I was the only black child in my sixth grade class, and she was as good a teacher as you could expect a teacher to be. When I became a teacher many years later, I remembered some of the things that she did and how she handled certain situations to help me with my own classroom.

Elise Harvey taught me that if you don't know something, say you don't know. And then allow the person to show you. You're never too old to learn, and you can learn from a child as well as you can teach a child.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You and your husband, Fred McKissack, collaborate on nonfiction books for children about the African-American experience: slavery, Civil Rights, as soldiers, etc. What's that collaboration like?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: Fred does research and I do the writing. We work on the computer, and create an outline of what we want to cover. And then Fred does the interviews with people. He also does the picture gathering, gets the rights information, and writes the photo captions. He also does the book collection for our personal library. Rather than run back and forth to the library, we purchase our own books. After we've finished with a project, we either donate them to a library or keep them if we're going to continue to work on the subject. We have almost 1,500 books, but we use them all the time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kind of research did you do for *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: We traveled to the area right outside of Richmond, Virginia, a setting we chose because that was the first place where Christmas was celebrated in America. In the Northern colonies, they really didn't celebrate Christmas. Christmas was not a feast day. It was just treated like an ordinary day. There was maybe prayer and a few services, but that was it.

Down in Virginia, there used to be a saying that they needed very little to have a celebration. They'd celebrate the coming of day, both slave and master. We went to Shirley Plantation, the oldest plantation that's still operating. We went into the family home, and looked at family diaries. The owner, Hill Carter, shared family stories, and we took pictures and just immersed ourselves. Our illustrator visited Shirley Plantation at Christmastime so that he could actually see what the house and the foliage and everything looked like at Christmas.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Of the different kinds of nonfiction books you publish for children that share historical and social information about the black experience, what stories are important to continue to tell and why?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: All of them, actually, because they are all linked. They're all puzzle parts. My whole life's work has been to try to fill in the puzzle parts that have been missing out of American history. I'm trying to create that story so that my children, my grandchildren, will be able to look at the picture and see where we fit into American history, not *African-American* history but *American* history.

I hope there will come a time when there is no longer a need for "Black History Month;" I hope that it will be an opportunity to celebrate but not used to teach.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've been contributing mightily to the offerings of books about the African-American experience, past and present, setting an example for many writers today.

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I'm such an encourager of new voices, because the more you tell the story, the better it becomes; the richer it becomes.

For example, biographies of Frederick Douglass are out there in my voice as well as in the voices of many others. It's just like Lincoln and Washington and the other great heroes. We don't say we don't need another Lincoln book. When Russell Freedman did his Lincoln book (*Lincoln: A Photobiography*) and won the Newbery Award for it, how many Lincoln books had been published prior to that? He found information and included things in his book that made it stand out, in addition to just the sheer beauty of the writing.

There need to be more voices so that we hear the story from different points of view.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write your picture book *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth*?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: It was my children's experiences that inspired this book. I told them, "Now listen: you cannot just tell the truth in a hurtful, mean-spirited way, and that's what you've been doing. You say things and you fall back on the fact that it's the truth, but you're not telling it with love and honesty. You're doing it in a backhanded way." And they said, "But Mom, it's the truth. And you told us to always tell the truth." I said it's how you tell it and why you tell it that can make all the difference in the world.

Fast-forward many years later, I have a grandson. And he's telling the truth no matter how much it hurts other people. So I said it was time for a book. I wrote *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* as a guide for parents to use with their children and grandchildren.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your books, such as *Mirandy and Brother Wind* and *Flossy and the Fox* seamlessly merge folklore and history into a good read with historical and cultural underpinnings. How do you go about blending facts and story?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: A lot of my stories that I write come out of the research that I've been doing for another book, and sometimes a piece or fact will give me the reason or the inspiration to write a picture book.

For example, I was working on *Red-Tail Angels: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*. Fred's grandfather, Papa Mose McKissack, was the contracting builder of the Tuskegee Air Base at Tuskegee University in Alabama. So, I was digging around in his old files and ran across a picture of Papa Mose and Miranda, Fred's grandmother, in dress clothes standing around a cake, grinning. And on the back of the photo it said, "Winners of the cakewalk." And I thought, "Oh my gosh, there's a story here."

In the story the girl was supposed to be named "Miranda." But she changed her own name, and I'll tell you how. Once I've written my stories, I record them and listen to myself reading them back so I can see if it reads well and it has a good rhythm. Then I know I'm on target. Well, I said, "When the sky turned morning pink, Miranda ran to grandmamma Beasley to ask her about how to catch the wind."

And I said, "What did I say?" And I went back and listened, and I heard, "When the sky turned morning pink, *Mirandy* — I didn't say *Miranda*. She'd changed her name, and I liked it better. That kind of stuff happens all the time — where I absolutely don't know where it came from but it just did. Besides, "Mirandy" sounds much more like a wind-dancer than "Miranda." "Miranda" has a hard ending. "Mirandy" is more like a dancer to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why do you so often include an Author's Note in your books?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: When I was a girl, I always enjoyed "what if-ing" and asking questions about how did a story come to be and why. Even today, after I've read a story, I have a whole bunch of questions about its origin.

I thought kids are probably like that today, too. I know what I would have asked, so I try to anticipate that and put it in my introduction so that they'll know the backdrop for the story and some history around it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You mention your grandmother often, in stories as well as in personal accounts. What are the ways in which your grandmother influenced your life?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I had two wonderful grandmothers, and in my stories they blend. When I say "grandmother," I know which one, but the reader doesn't. Grandmamma Sarah, or Mama Sarah, as she was called, is my paternal grandmother. Grandmamma Frances, or Mama Frances, was my maternal grandmother. The grandparents that lived in Nashville were Mama Frances and Daddy James. Those were the front porch people. She's the ghost story teller.

Mama Sarah also lived in Nashville early on, but she moved to St. Louis. We used to do all kinds of wonderful things together, and I just I loved her. I stayed with her for a school year when my parents divorced, and then went to Nashville to live with my mother and brother and sister.

So I hold dual citizenship between St. Louis and Nashville and both of my grandmothers influenced my life. They were very strong positive women. They were women of faith, of great

courage, and hardworking. Interestingly, my grandmothers knew each other and were best friends before my mother and father ever met. And after the divorce, they remained good friends.

My mother and father remained friends after the divorce as well. They were 17 when they got married and they simply outgrew each other. So, they were good friends until they both died. When my mom died, my father said, “Well, my oldest and best friend is gone.” And they had such a lasting relationship because of those two women — their mothers; my grandmothers. Those women shared the raising of us with my mother. They were the “triumvirate.” They were the matriarchs of our family. And, my sister’s name is Sarah Frances, named for them both.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Which of your books are used most in the classroom?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: *Messy Bessy* is one of my best-selling books. The rhyme, the rhythm, the repetition — they all just fit together. The kids can read the simple text, and they can relate to the story. Everybody can relate to a messy Bessy. I get lots of letters from kindergarteners and first graders on that book and how much they enjoy it.

Flossy and the Fox is a close second.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I tell students that reading is important. I absolutely encourage literacy. I encourage not only reading but sharing what you have read. I encourage students to journal — to tell their own stories and to listen to their classmates’ stories. I encourage the whole communication model of reader-writer, reader-speaker, listener — all of those skills.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I encourage teachers to knock down the walls of their classrooms. There’s a world out there, and if they can introduce their children to other cultures and other ways in which people make decisions and solve problems, they are equipping their children to use their education in ways that can move humanity forward. The more we know about other people, the more we have models to follow. Different is not a synonym for wrong.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I try to work every day. I get up in the morning, have breakfast, listen to the news and plan my day. I make a few phone calls to family and friends. And then, I head for our office downstairs, and I work. I’m project driven. I say, “I will finish chapter one today, and I will work down here until I finish chapter one.” Sometimes I finish at Noon, and I’ve got the rest of the day off.

But then sometimes it’s midnight, and Fred has to make me go to bed. And I will when I put that last sentence down in chapter one. So I work until I complete the chore that I have assigned myself for that day.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: When I'm stuck, I move on to something else. I have four or five books working at the same time, and they're all in different stages. Some are in galley. Some are in idea. Some are in draft. Some are in rewrite. So, whenever I find myself stuck and the juices aren't flowing, I just close that file and open another.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You describe your writing career as one that started with reading up on children's literature. How do you suppose this exposure to books impacted your career?

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: It prepared me for my first job, which was the children's book editor at Concordia Publishing House. When I was working on my master's degree, I did an independent study at Concordia, shadowing the editor there. And when she left, she said I ought to apply for her job. And I did and got it. I credit all of that independent work that I had done in studying in preparation for my career.

I did work hard in learning, and I often joke in saying the reason why my son Fred Jr. writes is because he got his master's degree by accompanying me to class when he was a child.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have produced books with your children as well as your husband, Fred.

PATRICIA MCKISSACK: I enjoy working with my family. Each one of them independently came to me and said, "You know Mom, I'd like to do a book with you." They have their own lives, but they still enjoy writing with Fred and me.

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