Barbara Park, interviewed in Chicago, Illinois, on January 31, 2008, while on tour from Arizona.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are a very successful author of children’s books. The Junie B. Jones series, for example, has been a national bestseller for many consecutive years. When you meet strangers on a plane and they ask what you do for a living, what do you tell them?

BARBARA PARK: I will try to talk about almost anything but what I do. There’s celebrity attached to being an author that makes me uncomfortable, so I like to avoid it. The way these conversations on airplanes usually go is, I try to guide the discussion to anything except work. I just dread getting into the, “I’m a writer,” conversation, especially when I’m just relaxing on an airplane.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your career as a writer begin?

BARBARA PARK: I slipped in the back door. I always was the class clown in high school: the girl that was just cracking kids up in class inappropriately, and was voted wittiest in my class. When I realized that I didn’t want to teach, I was recently married and my husband was in the service. We were traveling around, and we started a family. I thought, “I’m going to have to get a job. What could I do?” I knew that I could probably be funny on paper if I found a publisher, because I had tried other kinds of writing, like a greeting card from Hallmark and writing for newspapers.

When I finally started writing a middle-grade novel, Operation: Dump the Chump (1982), it felt like a perfect fit. It was about two brothers who couldn’t stand each other. I had two little boys, so I had some inspiration. I sent it to Knopf, and they liked it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did the Junie B. Jones series begin?

BARBARA PARK: Janet Schulman, the publisher at Random House, wanted to start a series of easy readers called “Step-Into-Reading.” She asked four different authors to write a four-book miniseries of short chapter books. [Editor’s note: these initial series were: “Junie B. Jones” by Barbara Park; “Magic Tree House” by Mary Pope Osborne; “Nate the Great” by Marjorie Sharmat and “Marvin Redpost” by Louis Sachar.]

By the time that Random House invited me to write “Junie B. Jones,” I had published about 10 middle grade novels, including Skinnybones (1982) and The Kid in
The Red Jacket (1988). Janet gave us the reading level, told us how long the books had to be, and then gave us freedom by saying, “Go with it.”

There was some worry about whether my dry sense of humor would translate to first and second graders. I got around that by putting myself into the head of a five-year-old girl. I would speak exactly like she would, which means that I would have trouble with the language and trouble with keeping my personality reined in, as I did at that age. Junie B. Jones was born.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you inhabit the mindset of your young characters in your writing?

BARBARA PARK: Teachers will ask, “How do you know what children are thinking when they are eight or 10 or six?” Apparently, I just didn’t mature. It’s just a question of putting myself at a particular age and in a particular position. When I was writing about Molly Vera Thompson, a six-year-old character from The Kid in the Red Jacket, I just reduced life to the simplest common denominator. That age group doesn’t have all the rules yet. I tried to look at the problems that Molly had to face with clear, simple eyes.

I certainly wasn’t as over the top as Junie when I was her age. But in first grade, I was sent to the principal for talking in class. I always had something to say that I thought really needed to be said right at that moment. My father was the president of the board of education, so that did not go over particularly well …

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are very human. Junie is a girl who makes mistakes—in her actions, her language, and her life, because she’s five. How do readers respond to her humanity?

BARBARA PARK: This is a little girl whose personality is too strong for her age. Kids see that Junie B. is out of control, and they love that. She’s also a lot like other kids. That’s where you get the humor.

I got a great letter from a girl who said, “We know that Junie isn’t real, but could she come to our school?” That spoke so well to the idea that she’s fictional, yet should be in a real classroom.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do the situations that Junie encounters, and their resolutions, convey any kind of moral for your readers?

BARBARA PARK: Junie B.’s problems are everyday issues that all kids encounter. Those include dealing with other kids and being embarrassed, afraid, hurt, and scared to speak in front of somebody. They are essentially just daily life hitting her from all angles.

I try really hard not to set a moral. The situations work out as they work out. Sometimes Junie does the wrong thing, and she has to pay the price. I think that teachers often try too hard to teach a lesson with literature. And for me, that’s not what I see with my books. I would like to see a story discussed, but not with any kind of heavy moral or
lesson learned because I don’t believe it’s the purpose of fictional characters to teach you anything.

TEACHINGBOOKS: That’s interesting in light of a public debate over Junie’s incorrect grammar, which was spotlighted in a 2007 *New York Times* article by Anna Jane Grossman, “Is Junie B. Jones Talking Trash?” (Read it at: teachingbooks.net/JunieBNYTimes.)

BARBARA PARK: I have been fighting a battle about Junie’s imperfect grammar with a small segment of the readership for a very long time. The *New York Times* reporter seemed to have friends who loved the books and other friends who thought they were detrimental to their kids.

   I would like to note two things on this topic. One, I have never received a letter from a disgruntled parent telling me that my books lower expectations for society’s children. The second point concerns the letters I get complaining that Junie does not speak the Queen’s English. They say, “How dare I write books in which a character misspeaks?” Well, never once has one of those letters been grammatically correct. I love it.

   A librarian and linguist, Jill Ratzan, wrote a paper on Junie B. Jones, called “You are not the Boss of my Words,” and it was published in *Children and Libraries* in 2005. She researched Junie speak and found that Junie really is getting language right. The things that Junie’s missing are all of the exceptions in our language, so in her mind she is following almost every single rule.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In 2004 you made the “Top 10 most challenged authors” list, according to the American Library Association. What are you thoughts about that?

BARBARA PARK: Could there be a better honor, really? People act like I’m teaching children how to blow up cats. They say about me, “She’s using her verb tenses incorrectly.”

   Nobody would say, “Don’t play with Suzie next door. She doesn’t have her verb tenses down right.” But yet they will do that with my books. I’m not writing *The Chicago Manual of Style*. There are places to learn grammar and places to learn to enjoy reading.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Despite the controversy over Junie’s grammar, the Junie B. Jones books are often used for educational purposes. Will you share some examples of how teachers successfully incorporate them into the curriculum?

BARBARA PARK: Teachers are amazing allies of this series. There is a school in Phoenix called the Creighton Elementary School that has a large number of ESL students. One of the second grades used Junie B. to help motivate students who couldn’t read.

   A teacher in Georgia had a student in the lowest reading group. She started reading Junie B. in the classroom and this piqued this student’s interest. His reading
improved, and by the end of the year he started getting in trouble because he was reading the books during math.

I called the teacher and asked her if he would be embarrassed if I dedicated a book to him. She told me that he had moved, but she said, “I will guarantee you that this will be one of the highlights of this boy’s life.” So I did. The next year, his old school had him back to sign copies of the book.

I also heard that the books were going to be published in English for readers in Indonesia with the incorrect words circled, so that they would be used as English teaching tools.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The humor in the Junie B. Jones books works on different levels—for both adults and children.

BARBARA PARK: When my boys were little, Sesame Street did the same thing for me, making me laugh at a different level than my children. There were jokes for the moms who were watching with their kids. I like to enjoy my writing, and I put little innuendos in there that I as an adult would enjoy reading.

Also, older kids can enjoy the books on a different level than the younger readers. Some parents say to me, “My child is now in sixth grade and still reading the Junie B. Jones series.” I’ve even gotten fan letters from high schoolers. I’ve written back saying, “Thank you, but it’s really time for you to move on.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Junie has gone from kindergarten to first grade over the course of the series, with the 2001 arrival of the Junie B., First Grader series. How has she changed?

BARBARA PARK: She has better command of the language than she did in Kindergarten. She doesn’t say “runned” or “bended” or “throwed” anymore. She’s trying harder to stay in her seat now. She doesn’t hit people as much as she used to. I tone her down and make sure that sometimes she speaks more correctly. Sometimes she uses and misuses the same words. She’ll say “exactly” and still says “zzactly.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Junie B. Jones books attract a large readership among boys. What do you suppose makes her appealing to them?

BARBARA PARK: Junie B. is not really a girly girl. I try to keep her problems generic. There’s an occasional book in which she’s a bride’s maid or a flower girl. Other than that, I could almost call her “Johnny B. Jones” and most of the books would not change drastically.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Kid in the Red Jacket, a middle grade novel, is about Howard Jeeter—a boy who has to adjust to a new environment when his family moves across the country. What drew you to this topic?
BARBARA PARK: We live in a mobile society, and many families move around a lot. Parents do kids a disservice when they say, “Oh, children will always bounce back.” Since my husband was in the service, our family relocated often and we moved the kids to different schools. One of the most difficult things I learned a child has to do is to walk into that classroom as the new kid.

I had a lot of fun writing The Kid in the Red Jacket, particularly with the character of Molly Vera Thompson, the little girl who tries to be friends with Howard. There’s nothing that she won’t say. It’s very freeing to write a character like that. She inspired me to have Junie B. do the same thing; she is really Junie’s prototype.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Two of your other middle-grade novels, The Graduation of Jake Moon (2000) and Mick Harte was Here (1995), involve kids who are facing very serious problems.

BARBARA PARK: Mick Harte Was Here is about a girl who has lost her brother in a bike accident, and The Graduation of Jake Moon follows a boy’s grandfather through his decent into Alzheimer’s disease. Those are deep issues, and those two books are most dear to me. Jake Moon has been raised by his grandfather and his mother, and I put Jake at that sensitive early teen age where everything is embarrassing to him. That bond between a boy and a grandfather is so beautiful, and then you see it shrivel. Jake gets mad, and then he steps up.

Buddies (1985), which is now out of print, is about a very sweet girl, Dinah, who is nice to everybody, but always wants to be in the popular crowd. She goes to camp, reinvents herself, and does something extremely cruel to a nerdy girl just to stay in the cool group. At the end, Dinah feels horrid and tries to apologize. The other girl refuses to forgive her. I got a lot of flack from teachers for that. But I feel like life is like that sometimes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your motivation to write Skinnybones, which is considered one of your funniest books?

BARBARA PARK: The whole purpose of Skinnybones was purely to make the reader laugh. It was to get those reluctant boy readers to say, “Pick up the book.” It’s about a wisecracking kid and its about baseball. I decided to update Skinnybones 15 years after it was published, because kids didn’t recognize the names of the baseball players I wrote about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The picture book Ma! There’s Nothing to do Here! (2008) is written from the perspective of a child in utero. How did this book come about?

BARBARA PARK: My boys were born in the 1970s, before the sonogram was invented. So my pregnancies were just about me and my weight and my aches and pains. I never imagined what was going on inside. My daughter-in-law invited me to the sonogram of my
first grandbaby. She was pointing out body parts. “Oh, look. There’s his little elbow.” I was so fascinated, but I was mostly concerned that this baby seemed so bored. I looked at her belly and thought, “You’re just in there doing nothing. Tomorrow you’ll be doing nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. And this is going to go on for months.” If this had been my own children, I probably would have swallowed a rattle or a duck so it would have something to play with. I wrote a poem for my daughter-in-law’s baby shower that began, “What’s a baby to do in a womb with no view.” When I read the poem to my editor, she said, “That’s a picture book.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students who want to write?

BARBARA PARK: The main thing is that writing is just a job. For me, it’s not about celebrity. It’s a job and it’s attainable if someone really wants it and is good at it. Sometimes kids really want to write, but they give up because it just looks like they can’t do it or it’s too exclusive a club.

I couldn’t be a neurosurgeon. So I tell students that you have to have a realistic sense of what your talents are, but you don’t necessarily have to approach it with the idea that you were touched by the hand of God to do this. I want to take the mystique out of professionalism for them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

BARBARA PARK: “Thank you.” Teachers are the ones in the trenches, and they really make a difference. They are my heroes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday for you?

BARBARA PARK: I need some kind of a big monster to scare me into the office. Usually it’s noon, and I’m still in my pajamas trying to figure out what else I can do not to get dressed and act like I’m going to work. I check my email. And then, if I’m working on a project, I turn it on and I look at it, and then I turn it off. Then I think of all the things that I have to do rather than sit down and work. Taking out the trash. Brushing the dog’s teeth. I finally pull myself into the room and sit down. Once the work starts, it flows.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your writing process?

BARBARA PARK: I usually don’t have anything very structured. I have the basic story in my head, and I have the middle in mind before the beginning. But above and beyond that, I say, “Okay, how will this end up?”

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?
BARBARA PARK: I gut it out. There’s no such thing as writer’s block. It’s there all the time. I brainstorm with my family and my editor. I get a lot of ideas in the shower or the tub. I don’t give myself a few days for it to come out, because that’s not how it happens with me.

I do have this great luxury of being able to write funny. It puts me in a good mood, and I will often laugh at a lot of things that I write.

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