



Margaret Peterson Haddix

TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Margaret Peterson Haddix, interviewed in her Columbus, Ohio home on April 3, 2014.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books have received American Library Association Best Book and Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers notations, *New York Times* bestseller status, the International Reading Association's Children's Book Award, and more than a dozen state reader's choice awards. Were you a big reader as a child?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I was one of those kids who would pretty much read anything I could get my hands on. I was fairly non-discriminating—if there weren't any books available, I'd be reading the back of cereal boxes and figuring out all the ins and outs of Cap'n Crunch's behind-the-scenes life.

There usually were plenty of books available, though. Both of my parents really loved to read—they continue to love to read—and they passed that love on to my brothers and sister and me. They were very good about taking us to the library. I don't think they could have afforded to buy all the books that we wanted, but we went to the library every week. I would check out fifteen books, and when I finished my stack, I'd move on to whatever my brother was reading. By doing that, I got a pretty diverse reading background.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You grew up in a rural farming community.

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I did. It's kind of funny; I don't know that I would have been a tomboy had I grown up in a different environment, but the fact that I had two brothers and that we lived on a farm meant that I spent a lot of time running around outdoors, doing things that cause people to say now, "You did *that* as a kid?"

On the farm, entertainment meant either playing with siblings or reading. We did a lot of both. But I found it difficult to put books down even when I was away from the farm. Whenever we'd go on family vacations, my parents would say, "Would you just put that book down and look at what's around you?" We'd be in the middle of a desert and I wouldn't have noticed. And then my mother would confess that her parents had said the same thing to her when she was a

kid, and I've found myself saying the same thing to my kids, so there's definitely something genetic going on.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you believe there is a connection between your strong reading skills as a child and your interest in writing?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I believe that for me, there is. For me, I think the more I read, the better a writer I become. But it's been very interesting to discover that many other writers were not bookworms as children, and in some cases, they struggled with reading. And I think that experience gives them the ability to relate to reluctant readers on a personal level. So I don't believe that being an obsessive reader as a kid is the only way to become a writer. It might make things easier in some ways, for some people. But it's not a prerequisite.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Have you always been interested in being a children's author, or have you dabbled in different kinds writing?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: By the time I was in college, I knew I wanted to do something that involved writing, books, and words, but I wasn't really sure how I would make that work. I knew there were different options, though. At the time, the college I attended had seven or so different English majors, and I'm pretty certain that at some point or another, I had declared a major in all of them except linguistics. Early on, I just wasn't certain exactly what sort of English I wanted to major in.

By the end of my freshman year I had zeroed in on technical writing, figuring that would be great because I could take both journalism and creative writing classes. But when I went to meet with the technical writing advisor, I realized that technical writing wasn't at all what I wanted to do. I left it as my major for a while before it dawned on me that I should just major in journalism and creative writing! That ended up being a good balance for me, because if I was ever frustrated with one kind of writing one day, I could just embrace the other.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You began your writing career in journalism. Did that help strengthen your skills as a creative writer?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: It really did, though I did not necessarily view it as a good way to build my creative writing skills when I was first starting out as a journalist. I don't recall the exact chronology, but around that time there had been a couple of scandals in the journalism world involving people who had completely fabricated stories, including someone who won a Pulitzer Prize for a story she had completely made up. So at the time, since there was heightened sensitivity about making things up, I decided that I wasn't going to tell anyone that I did creative writing, too.

Journalism was excellent for my creative writing, though. It exposed me to a lot of different people. As a journalist, you're often just sitting down with

somebody, asking them questions about their lives, kind of putting yourself in their place and seeing how they might see things very differently than you do, because they've had different life experiences. That was invaluable to me later in terms of character creation. Thanks to those conversations, I now have a better sense of how, and in what sort of range, people might view things.

Beyond that, of course, all the writing experience was helpful. The day-in, day-out process of having to produce a fair amount of copy is pretty priceless when it comes to improving writing. You might have fifteen minutes to write a news story, and all the facts have to be correct, and all the names have to be spelled correctly, and you have to quote everybody accurately. When you've done that countless times, you just get in that habit of write, write, write.

Of course, my experience as a journalist also taught me to appreciate the enormous freedom that comes with creative writing. The freedom to use my imagination, rather than being confined to the facts of what happened in real life to real people, is liberating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write your first book?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I had always kept up with my fiction writing, even while working as a newspaper reporter where I often had time limitations and deadlines. I wasn't necessarily producing a lot of fiction, but I was inspired by the fact that I'd had some minor successes with some short stories I'd written. Also, my senior honors project in college was writing a novel, and my professor at the time gave me a lot of encouragement and suggested revisions, and then provided the name of an agent to send it to. I worked on the manuscript and sent it out, and I received a letter back that said, "I'm going to pass on this, but please send me your next work." It was devastating on the one hand, but it also gave me a kernel of hope.

So I figured I'd work as a reporter for the steady income, and do creative writing when I could. In the midst of all this I got married, and my husband was offered a job in a small town in Illinois, where his position was to be the city editor of the newspaper. Suddenly I was faced with a situation where, if I wanted to continue in journalism, I would either have to work for a competitor, which meant a bureau for the Champagne-Urbana paper, or I would have to have my husband as my boss.

I don't think they actually had anti-nepotism rules, so it would have been feasible, but it just didn't strike me as a good idea, personally or professionally. So we talked about it, and I thought that maybe this was my chance to really focus on writing fiction and see what happens. So I took a job teaching part-time at a community college, and I spent the other half of my workweek focusing on writing. And that was when I wrote my first book that eventually got published: *Running Out of Time*, which I sold with a story I'd written prior to that called *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: By the time your first book was published, you had transitioned to being a full-time mom. How did you manage to find a balance between parenting and writing?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I feel very, very fortunate in this respect. When my first book was published, my kids were one and almost three. I had planned to stay home full-time with them, and it turned out that writing was the perfect other job for me to have because, with the exception of far-off deadlines, I wasn't really accountable to anybody but my kids on a daily basis. So if my kids got sick, I didn't have to let anyone know I wasn't coming into the office. It was just a question of me telling myself that I wasn't going to get a particular scene written that day, and I'd deal with it later.

That flexibility was really nice, and again, I was so fortunate it worked out that way. I was also fortunate in that right around the time my kids were both in school for full days, I agreed to write the second book in the Shadow Children series. I went from having one book published a year to two, and sometimes even three. So that timing worked out well. It was great, too, because the flexibility of writing also allowed me to do volunteer work at my kids' elementary school. I would have done it no matter what, but volunteering there also allowed me to kind of spy on the way things work in schools, which of course informed my writing as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Among the Hidden* was your first book in the Shadow Children series. Please talk about how that book came to be.

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: *Among the Hidden* was the first book I wrote that wasn't inspired by something I had written about or experienced as a newspaper reporter. I'd gotten the initial ideas and I'd done a lot of research for the three books I published prior to *Among the Hidden* while I was a reporter. But *Among the Hidden* was different, because concept came to me when my husband and I were starting to discuss whether or not we would have a third child.

It had been so easy for us to decide to have kids in the first place—and more than one. But the question of a third child led to a lot of discussion. We started talking about issues like overpopulation, and whether that should affect our decision. At one point I thought, well, if overpopulation were that bad of a problem, there'd be a law that nobody could have more than two kids. And that seemed like it might be a good idea to write about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What sort of feedback have you received from readers about *Among the Hidden*, which is the story of a society in which families are only permitted to have two children?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I think the concept of the book interests readers, and I hear especially from those who are third children themselves, or fourth children—basically anyone who came beyond the second child. The

premise makes them think things like, “I wouldn’t even be here,” or “I would be forced to hide if I were growing up in that society.” They also are very interested in the fact that there are places in the world that do have fairly tight restrictions on population growth, with China, of course, being the main example.

I think, for a lot of kids, that *Among The Hidden* can be their first introduction to the notion that the government, in some places, can tell you what you’re allowed and not allowed to do in terms of the size of your family. And that’s very foreign to how a lot of kids think.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the Found series, which has a fascinating premise.

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: It’s sort of a weird series; it started with my thinking weird thoughts. Part of the inspiration came from the summer that the movie “Snakes on a Plane” came out. One day my husband and kids were riffing on what would be scarier than snakes on a plane—tarantulas, spiders, that kind of thing. At the time my husband had been traveling a lot, and he said that a plane full of crying babies would be the most horrifying thing ever. He was picturing sitting there on a cross-country flight, with babies crying in his ear the whole time.

All the while that he was describing this scene, I was busy thinking, *where did these babies come from?* I decided that would be a fascinating thing to explore: a planeload of babies. There could be all sorts of fun things to go along with a premise like that!

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you find appealing about series writing?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: It’s funny; I was actually kind of reluctant about writing series books in the beginning. But it’s something that I’ve enjoyed a lot. With every book I’ve ever written, I always find there is some tangent that I can’t follow, or some minor character that I think has a really interesting story, but I can’t explore it because it doesn’t fit the book I’m writing. Writing a series enables me to do that kind of exploring, to examine different angles that might not have fit the first book, but can play into subsequent books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What prompted you to write your fractured fairy tale novel, *Just Ella*?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: *Just Ella* came about in part as a reaction to my daughter going through a preschool phase where she just loved fairy tales. As much as I loved reading to her and encouraging her love of books, I started getting really fed up with the tales, and especially with the concept of love at first sight. Because the fact is, when it’s love at first sight, the only thing that really matters is the other person’s appearance.

So I was frustrated with that, and I focused a lot of that frustration on the Cinderella story in particular, because there’s so much effort that goes into

getting her to that ball where she meets the prince, and none of it is really her own effort. Depending on which version or story you're looking at, it's usually the fairy godmother or the mice who are sewing and creating everything for her, which just struck me as too easy. And after all the hoopla at the ball, the outcome is an agreement to marry someone that she's only known for five minutes or an hour, which didn't strike me as a good guarantee for happiness ever after.

I wanted to inject a little bit of reality into that scenario, without ruining the story. After all, I never once said to my daughter, "You know, this is terrible, quit listening to this," at least when she was that age. But by writing *Just Ella*, I could kind of vent my reaction to reading all of those fairy tales.

Later on, I published a companion novel to *Just Ella* called *Palace of Mirrors*. There were about ten years between the two, but people kept saying they wanted a sequel, so I did eventually write one. Since then I've done a third book connected to the first two, called *Palace of Lies*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are a contributor to the 39 Clues books, a collaborative adventure series written by outstanding children's book authors. Please talk about this experience and what it was like to participate in the effort.

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I wrote the tenth book in the 39 Clues series, and it was quite an honor. I went into the project pretty naïve; I didn't realize how hard it would be. But I was right that it would be extremely fun, a very cool concept, and incredible to work with some of the amazing material the previous authors came up with.

One thing I found challenging was ensuring that the story I wrote included everything it needed. When the series was set up, Rick Riordan, who did the first book, provided a very short synopsis for the books to come. It had been decided where the books were going to be set, and which historical figure each book would connect to. So when I agreed to be part of the series, I was told up front that my contribution would be set in England and/or Ireland, that William Shakespeare was the historical figure I would need to connect to, and that I needed to conclude the clue hunt. That was the challenge: bringing everything together.

One of the great things about it, for me, was revisiting a lot the Shakespeare I'd read in college as an English major. I had so much fun researching and pulling things out of my research for the book that I thought kids would find particularly fascinating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've written a lot of novels in a lot of genres.

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: It's true; I've bounced around. And I really appreciate the freedom I've been given to do that. I think sometimes authors do get sort of typecast. On occasion, probably because my more suspenseful books have gotten the most attention, I'll come out with another kind of book and someone will say something like, "Wait, this isn't the type of book you write." But I

started with different genres right from the start, with my first two works. One was YA, and one was middle grade; one was kind of realistic-contemporary, the other was more sci-fi mystery.

TEACHINGBOOKS: As a writer, do you see stories and plots unfold in real life when you're out and about?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: Oh yes. An example just happened to me last weekend, when I bought a new car. I'd been driving an eleven-year-old minivan, and with both my kids in college now, I decided I'm past the minivan stage. So when I went to pick up the new car, the dealer was teaching me about all the bells and whistles on it that didn't exist on my old minivan. One of those was the car key itself. It's not an actual key, it's this clicker-thing—and I had to decide whether to program it to unlock all of the car doors at once, or only the driver's-side door.

Suddenly I had this thought: *Well, if you were being chased by somebody, you would want to only unlock the driver's door so you could shut it and relock it quickly. But if you unlock all of the doors . . .* and I started exploring all these possibilities in my head, until it occurred to me that I was going to make this decision about my car based on an imagined situation in which I was trying to escape from someone. And then I wondered if I could put this in a book. What would happen if a teenager had this kind of key, and his or her parents set it differently than the teen thought? The “what ifs” started flowing, and I realized I'd missed half of what the guy was telling me because I was imagining scenarios that could become an important part of the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of the things you most enjoy about writing?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: It kind of depends on the day, what delights me most about writing. One thing I love to do is sneak some of my favorite words into my books. For example, in *Uprising*, which is my only truly historical novel and set in the early 1900s, there's a scene where one character calls another a “guttersnipe.” That's a word I came across in a lot of my grandmother's books, which I read as a child, and I've always thought it was a great word. It's certainly not a kind word, but it made me happy to slip it into a book because it had always resonated with me.

My book *Double Identity* is used a fair amount in schools to connect to questions of scientific development and ethics. For instance, if we have the scientific capability to do something, should we? Is it ethically right? The girl at the center of the story loves words, so I threw a lot of unusual, bizarre, and fun terms that I've always loved into *Double Identity*, too.

Another thing I absolutely love about writing is having the opportunity to meet so many interesting kids and teachers and librarians and booksellers. I didn't even think about that aspect when I was starting out as a writer, that there would be all these occasions to meet fascinating people and go to interesting places. So sometimes, that's what really delights me. And then, generally speaking, the flexibility that I have as a writer is very nice.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: Oh, tear my hair out! In all seriousness, it depends on how badly stuck I am. If what's technically holding me up is actually a minor problem, but it results in my thinking that what I'm writing is really terrible, then I force myself to keep going by telling myself that everything is okay, and I can always come back and revise. I just need to keep going and get the words on paper, and then revise what's terrible, and hopefully nobody will ever see how awful it really was.

Other times, though, I'm truly stuck and just spinning my wheels. At that point, when I'm ready to throw my computer out the window, I'll go do something either physically active or mentally mundane and calming. I'll swim laps or take a walk, or fold laundry or do dishes, or mow the lawn. I find that when I allow myself a break to do something that doesn't force my brain to get too involved, my brain is sort of freed up to roam. And that tends to be very helpful in getting my writing going again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical day like for you?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I am a morning person. When my husband leaves for work, I sit down at the computer and start writing. On an ideal day, I'll get in about four hours before lunch, and then I'll take a break to take care of emails or errands, and then I'll come back and write some more.

Of course, there are some days when the writing won't be going well, and I'll find myself looking for distractions—or there are days when I'll be so in the zone that I look at my watch and be stunned to discover that it's 3:00, and I've missed lunch and I'm starving!

TEACHINGBOOKS: You get to speak to a lot of librarians and educators. What do you like to tell them?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: Sometimes I'm a little bit intimidated by speaking, because I've often felt that there is an assumption that authors know how teachers and librarians can best use their books with children. In my case, I absolutely do not know—but happily, I have met so many creative educators over the years who have figured out some truly cool ways to connect my books with kids. So as time has gone on, I've stolen their wonderful ideas, and passed them along to other educators. And of course, I always try to credit the originators, so the wisdom of the brilliant teacher in upstate New York, for instance, who came up with this or that, is specifically acknowledged and appreciated.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell kids when you speak to them?

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX: I've found, based on the questions I get most commonly from kids, that what they seem to be most interested in is where

I get my ideas for books. So, often, that is a subject I focus on. I explain that my ideas come from every which way. A birthday card inspired one of my books. The actual moment I conceived of *Just Ella*, I was watching my daughter do a Cinderella puzzle. I explain to kids that if a person can get a book idea from a puzzle, or a birthday card, then you really can get ideas from anywhere.

I'll also share tips for how kids can improve their writing, or get started writing, because many of them want to know about that, too.

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