



Katherine Paterson

**Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

Katherine Paterson, interviewed in Barre, Vermont on October 21, 2011.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Every writer is influenced by their upbringing and the circumstances into which they were born. Your childhood certainly impacted who you became and the stories you tell. Please share what your childhood was like.

KATHERINE PATERSON: My mother came from Georgia, and my father from Virginia. They were missionaries in China, and I was born there in 1932. Generally, I think of the first five years of my life as really idyllic. We lived behind a wall on a compound way up in the country. Everyone else who lived on our compound was Chinese, so I was totally bilingual from the time I could speak, which was apparently quite early. In one of my father's letters to his mother, he remarked on how much I talked in two languages. I'm sure he was a little bemused by this child who could not be shut up in either language. It was wonderful to be totally loved in two languages from a very early age.

The summer just before I turned five we went up into the mountains for what we thought would be a brief vacation and never went home again because the war between China and Japan began in earnest. My father returned, but the rest of us were never able to go back during my whole childhood.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe what it was like to be in exile.

KATHERIN PATERSON: We were in the summerhouse not knowing what was happening to our father. We could hear bombs falling around us and heard rumors of what was happening down below us in the valley. Finally, it was decided that we should be sent back to the United States. So we came down the mountain. The only way you got up and down that mountain was on thousands of stone steps. We were carried in a sedan chair. Then, we were put on a boat to take us to the city, where we could catch a train.

After many days' journey, we arrived in Hong Kong. By this time, we were very dirty refugees, and the British government didn't know what to do with us. Somehow, a whole bunch of us off that refugee train ended up sitting in the lobby of the Peninsula Hotel—which was the grandest of all the grand hotels of Hong Kong—with the people who paid money to stay there sneering at us.

After that, my mother often said that she never looked at a picture of refugees in the paper without remembering how it felt. I think a lot of what I write starts in the Peninsula Hotel because I do care about people that the world sneers at, having experienced that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like being new to America?

KATHERINE PATERSON: When we came to the United States, I was foreign. I was made fun of. We had very little money, so I was wearing hand-me-down clothes that perhaps my classmates had given away because the clothes were no longer good for them.

We were in the States for a year, and then mercifully, went back to China, but not to our home place. My father was living across enemy lines, and it was hard to get mail through, so we never knew just how he was. We stayed in China until the American embassy realized that war between Japan and United States was imminent and sent us back to the United States.

Once again, I had to figure out how to operate in a country that was unfamiliar to me, with classmates who found me very strange and foreign. Eventually, I was able to adjust. We had to move a lot, so I felt like every time I made a friend that I couldn't bear to leave, I moved.

Eventually, I went to college, and my great longing was to go home to China. But by this time, the communists had taken over. There was no chance of me going back. I had a roommate in seminary who was Japanese, and, of course, the Japanese were the enemies, and I hated the enemy. I had lived in occupied China when we lived there the second time. The Japanese visited our home and interrogated my parents, so I hated and feared the Japanese.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you overcome your feelings of fear and hatred for the Japanese?

KATHERINE PATERSON: In college, I had a Japanese friend, and this changed my view. She persuaded me that if I would give the Japanese people a chance, I would come to love them. And, I did. I became a missionary in Japan, and I lived there from age 24 to 28. To be loved by people that you thought you hated is the kind of experience everybody should have. It was a life-changing time for me.

Then, I met John Paterson, and I began to be a writer. My first three books were all set in Japan because I love Japan and I wanted somehow to be back there. The books gave me a chance to read Japanese history pretty deeply and to find a story in Japanese history that I wanted to tell.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you still speak Chinese or Japanese or any other language besides English?

KATHERINE PATERSON: I've forgotten more languages than most people have ever heard of. My Japanese, which is the only other language that I can do at all is so rusty after 50 years that I'm embarrassed to open my mouth in Japanese. My Chinese is gone. My French, which never was very good, is gone. My Greek and Latin are both gone. And my English has its better days.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You describe yourself as a reader from a young age.

KATHERINE PATERSON: Yes. I was very fortunate because I was read to from before birth—I had an older brother and sister, and my mother always read to them. As soon as I joined the family, I was part of the reading circle. I really cannot remember not being able to read myself. I was jealous of my brother and sister who could read and somehow just did it magically and was reading well before I started first grade.

In fact, the thing that was so puzzling to me when I started first grade in America was they were reading these things that didn't make sense. "Run, Spot, run. Oh, oh, oh." And I was reading *The Secret Garden*. I thought it was two different processes. I didn't know the one had anything to do with the other.

I was considered sort of slow in American schools until the fifth grade. I was not considered very smart because things didn't make sense. At home, I had a very rich reading life, and at school I was given what seemed like nonsense to me.

My sanctuary was the school library. That was the one place in school where I felt safe. The librarian at Calvin H. Wiley School in Winston-Salem was wonderful to me. I made friends in books when I didn't have friends on the playground or in the classroom. I'll never be grateful enough to that librarian for creating such a safe and wonderful place for me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: A lot of people say the best advice for a future writer is to be a reader.

KATHERINE PATERSON: When kids ask me in school what they should do, I tell them to read, read, read, because that's the way to learn how language works. That's the way to learn how character is developed. That's the way to learn how plot works. Don't worry if some of the stuff you read is slop, because it's good to know the difference.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your stories embody universal concepts.

KATHERINE PATERSON: I think the human heart has a deep resonance with another human heart. I get wonderful letters from all over the world; I received a very eloquent letter just recently from this young man in China who wrote about *Bridge to Terabithia*. I really would like to answer it, but the return address is in Chinese characters. I'm trying to get up the nerve to try to write his address on the letter.

I had an astounding letter from a girls' school in Syria. They sent a letter showing them all sitting on rocks up above a round amphitheater, reading various copies of my books. They have *Bridge* and *Gilly* and *Lyddie* and I think they had *Same Stuff as Stars*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the impetus for writing *Bridge to Terabithia*, which won the 1978 Newbery Medal and is still popular today.

KATHERINE PATERSON: The year that led up to the writing of *Bridge* was a terrible year for our family. In April, I was operated on for cancer, and my children all were sure I was going to die. I wasn't sure that I wasn't. And then that summer, David's best friend, a little girl named Lisa Hill, was struck and killed by lightning, which was a totally unbelievable event. So here, I had my children already upset over their mother, and then this little girl that was truly David's soul mate was killed in this terrible way. It was just a very, very difficult time for us.

We were living one block out of Washington, D.C., and I belonged to the Children's Book Guild of Washington. The February following our terrible year, I went to a meeting of the Guild, and Ann Durrell, who was a publisher of children's books, was a guest of honor, and I was asked to sit at the head table with her. At some point, somebody turned to me and asked, "How are the children?"

Instead of saying they were fine, I began to blubber out everything that was not fine. When I finally ran out of steam, there was this dead silence, and then Ann Durrell said, "Well, you need to write that story." She said, "Of course, the child can't die by lightning because no editor would ever believe that." So I went back to my house that day, and I thought I can't make sense of Lisa's death, but the story has to make sense. So I'm going to try to write the story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What inspired your Newbery Honor book, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*?

KATHERINE PATERSON: *Gilly* started with a name. I had read the Tolkien books, and when I finished, I thought, "Some day I'm going to write a book, and the main character's name is going to be Galadriel." I didn't have any story to go with this child name Galadriel. After we were temporary foster parents, and I realized that I was not doing a very good job of being a foster parent, I wrote a Christmas story about a man who takes in two children for Christmas, and they are not grateful. That was sort of the birth of Gilly Hopkins.

She was a foster child who had been abandoned by one of the flower children who had read Tolkien. She had named her baby Galadriel and had left her with the foster care system. Galadriel had been bounced around, and she was going to get the world before it got her. I tried to ask myself how I would feel if the world thought I was disposable, and I decided I would be very angry.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about *Lyddie*.

KATHERINE PATERSON: I wrote *Lyddie* because I had just moved to Vermont, and I didn't really know much about the place. At the time, Vermont was looking forward to its 200th anniversary as a state, and I attended an all-day workshop about celebrating the bicentennial by remembering the place of women in the history of Vermont. I went just because there was a woman governor at the time, and I thought it was really jazzy to live in a state that had a woman as governor. She was going to speak at this event, and I thought it might give me a chance to meet other women who would be congenial, because I had just moved and, once again, had no friends.

The speakers read letters from Vermont farm girls who had gone to the factories of New Hampshire or Massachusetts to work, and those letters just put chills up and down my spine. I thought, “Somebody has got to write a book about these wonderful young women.”

I started not knowing anything about Vermont, much less about the Industrial Revolution in New England, and I learned a lot.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your second Newbery Medal book, *Jacob Have I Loved*.

KATHERINE PATERSON: Well, *Jacob* is kind of interesting because I just suddenly began hearing people that I cared about saying things like, “She always loved my brother best,” or, “You know, if my sister hadn’t done such and such when I was seven years old, my whole life would have been different.” And I thought it just seemed like a weird way to live—so crippled by jealousies of childhood.

I thought there should be some statute of limitations on what your brother or sister had done to you when you were seven years old. I’m a big Bible reader, and in the Bible, it’s not the parent/child relationship that seems to loom large. It’s the brother/brother or sister/sister relationship. There is the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob had two wives who were sisters, and the elder was extremely jealous of the younger one.

I thought maybe it’s our sibling relationships that shape our lives even more than our parent/child relationships. So I thought I’d be starting out with somebody else’s problem because I always kind of felt sorry for Esau anyhow. I thought he got a raw deal because he turns out to be a much nicer person than Jacob, really. Then I would go to work and every day I would be so furious I could hardly write. So I began to realize that maybe it was not totally somebody else’s problem. It’s lots cheaper than psychotherapy to write a book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your husband is a retired minister. Please share the role religion has played in your life.

KATHERINE PATERSON: It’s a vital part of my life. People talk about my books having hope and grace in them. That’s what my faith has given me: hope and grace. I just feel like it’s a gift of grace that I’ve been given the ability to write these books that matter to people. And, if you’re not a person of hope, it doesn’t work to tack hope on the end of a story. It has to be an organic part of who you are.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is it like working with your husband on a book?

KATHERINE PATERSON: It’s a lot more fun than wallpapering with him. We came to near disaster over trying to wallpaper together. Each time we’ve done a book together, we’ve done it a little differently. The first time we collaborated, on *Consider the Lilies*, he did all the research, and I did all the writing. With *Images of God*, we both wrote, and then we rewrote each other. *Blueberries for the Queen* was really his story, and he told it first,

then I rewrote it. With *The Flint Heart*, we were trying to abridge Eden Phillpotts. John went through it chapter by chapter and decided what was vital to retain and what had to go in order to make it accessible. Then I would go upstairs and try to rewrite it in a way that would knit it all back together. It still sounds like Eden Phillpotts because we used his language wherever we could. And when we couldn't, we imitated it because we wanted to have that early 20th century voice come through.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why did you want to revive *The Flint Heart* for another generation to read?

KATHERINE PATERSON: One of John's favorite writers is Margaret Mahy, and Margaret was asked, along with many others of us, "What 20th century book do you want to make sure is available for children in the 21st century?" And Margaret said *The Flint Heart*, of which we had never heard. I guess not many people had in this country. So John made it a personal quest to find himself a copy of this long-out-of-print book. He read it, and he really loved it.

He tried to get it republished as it was, but no one would. It is basically a wonderful, wonderful story, but it's just got too many things in it that would either be boring or would just not make any sense to a modern reader. So we put our heads together and decided we would freely abridge it and take out what was inaccessible and try to turn it into a story that could be read and enjoyed. The illustrator, too, just loved the book, and you can see that love in every creature he created.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're the 2011 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. What is your cornerstone message?

KATHERINE PATERSON: They asked me to choose a platform, and I chose "read for your life" because I think the life of an individual is so shaped by reading or not reading. I think part of the problem of our country right now is that we're a country of nonreaders. Even people who know how to read, don't, or they certainly don't read deeply and thoughtfully.

So I think it's very important for us to be a reading nation—not only for ourselves, but I want people to read in families and have a way to talk about things in families. I want us to read for the sake of our democracy because we need to be able to think deeply. Tweeting doesn't make us into thoughtful citizens. I have yet to meet the person who has texted his way to wisdom or tweeted her way to compassion.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the *The Exquisite Corpse Adventure*: a story developed by multiple authors and illustrators and made available online and now in print.

KATHERINE PATERSON: I'm the vice president of the National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance, and we have a wonderful, imaginative president and chief executive. We have worked closely with the Library of Congress, and they wanted some way to bring young readers to their *read.gov* website. They jumped on board at The Center for

the Book for doing a story game in which a number of writers and illustrators would team up and one writer would write a chapter, and then pass it on to the next writer to write the next chapter.

Jon Scieszka, who was the first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, was asked to write the first chapter. If you know Jon, you know he's totally crazy. I was to write the second chapter. I realized quickly that my job was just to keep the hero and heroine alive because he was going to kill them in 47 seconds. So, then I handed it on to Kate DiCamillo, and she handed it on . . . Then I became the second National Ambassador, and the second National Ambassador had to write the last chapter. So there I was, with everybody else's craziness to tie up in a neat little package. But it really was fun.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you think writing an Exquisite Corpse is an exercise that students can do?

KATHERINE PATERSON: Yes. That's what we are hoping, and we have all kinds of help on the NCBLA website for teachers encouraging children to do just that very thing. It's at www.dncbla.org.

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

KATHERINE PATERSON: My chief message is to encourage them to read for both enjoyment and information, as well as to understand themselves and other people better. They always ask me about writing, and I tell them that the way I learned to write was by reading.

I'm a little subversive in that I do believe that the reader gets to choose the message or the learning from whatever he or she reads. Each of us comes to a book with a different life experience, a different imagination, and different needs. We go to a book of any richness and take from it what we will. I tell students that if a teacher tells them what the book means, they will need that for the test. But that's not really what the book has to mean to them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

KATHERINE PATERSON: Isaac Asimov said he used to go to a B movie. He did something that didn't use the writing part of his brain. Then he'd go home, and he'd be unstuck. So my idea is that being stuck is not a fatal disease. It's just a symptom that something has gone wrong. Even if you just go to bed and go to sleep, sometimes the next morning it works out for you.

I remember in *Jip, His Story*, I didn't know why the child had been left on the road and had no one had come back for him. That didn't make any sense to me. I really couldn't write the book until I could figure out why that happened. One morning, I woke up and realized why it happened, but I really fought it because I didn't want that to be the reason. I was trying to write an adventure story. But the more I thought about it, the more

I realized that was the reason. If you keep pushing, it doesn't work. You just have to go weed the garden or take a walk or go to bed or do something entirely different and let your subconscious work on it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You speak to teachers, librarians in particular. What is your message for them?

KATHERINE PATERSON: In this day and time, when society is not valuing teachers and librarians, a lot of what I do is to tell them how valuable they are and thank them for what they're doing under very, very difficult circumstances.

The only thing I ask is that they don't make it so children can't enjoy the experience of reading books. When I heard that my books were being used in school, at first all I could think of was how George Elliot was ruined for me for 40 years because of the way *Silas Marner* was taught to me in the eighth grade. I don't want a child to come away from one of my books saying, "Well, I used to like *Bridge to Terabithia*." I want teachers to ask questions that they don't have the answer for and to enjoy the experience of talking about it with students. I want them to be co-learners with the children and co-enjoyers of the book—and never, never, never to teach a book that they don't love.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have received many, many recognitions and high honors for individual books as well as your body of work. How does that feel?

KATHERINE PATERSON: If I believed all the recognition, I'd be in trouble. More than recognition, the gift that being a children's book writer has given me is friends. To be able to know the writers that I know and love—who know and love me—has just been so wonderful. And then to have that sort of mystical communion with a reader—here I was, a child whom nobody seemed to understand, and now I have children all over the world who understand me on a very deep level, and we have this connection that's just miraculous to me.

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