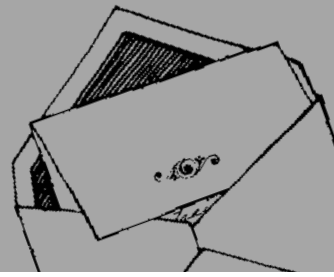


About Patricia MacLachlan



"There is no better model than a good book."

—Patricia MacLachlan

When Patricia MacLachlan talks about her career as a writer, she says that she always knew she wanted to write. But when she was young she thought that it was a job that she couldn't do. MacLachlan explains, "First, let me say that as a child I made a conscious decision not to be a writer because I thought writers had all the answers." MacLachlan eventually came to understand that people write to help *find* answers to their questions and to help them understand life better. As an adult she finally got up the courage to try it. Although she had a late start, she went on to become an award-winning author.

Patricia Pritzkau (MacLachlan) was born on March 3, 1938, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and was raised in Minnesota. Both states are in the western part of the United States. MacLachlan says that even though she moved east as an adult, she never let go of the bond she formed with her roots: "I have an amazingly close connection to the prairie. Each time I return I feel like I am home." It was this relationship with the West that helped her create the vivid setting in *Sarah, Plain and Tall*: "Sarah came in

the spring. She came through green grass fields that bloomed with Indian paintbrush, red and orange, and blue-eyed grass. . . . Gophers ran back and forth across the road, stopping to stand up and watch the wagon. Far off in the field a woodchuck ate and listened. Ate and listened.”

MacLachlan has no brothers or sisters, but did have a very close relationship with her parents throughout her childhood. She spent much of her time with her dad, Philo, and her mom, Madonna, so their influences molded her as a person. Her parents were both schoolteachers and brought many books into their household. They encouraged her to “read a book and find out who you are,” so she became an avid reader. She had an extremely active imagination and would often read a book and then act out scenes from it with her father.

Patricia eventually moved to the East Coast. In 1962, she graduated from the University of Connecticut and married psychologist Robert MacLachlan. Like her parents, she became a teacher. She taught English at Bennett Junior High School in Manchester, Connecticut, from 1963 until 1979.

The MacLachlans have three children: John, Jamie, and Emily. Patricia spent a great deal of time reading to her kids when they were young, just as her parents had done with her when she was a child. Her family has always been a very important part of her life. But as her kids grew older and became more independent, she began to feel “a need to do something else.”

At the age of thirty-five MacLachlan, in addition to teaching, was working at the Children's Aid Family Service Agency. She interviewed possible foster mothers and wrote articles about adoption and foster care. It was at this time that she realized her concern for families and children and her commitment to children's literature were what really excited her. MacLachlan decided she wanted to pursue writing for kids. She says, "It dawned on me that what I really wanted to do was to write. How would I ever have the courage, I wondered. It was very scary to find myself in the role of student again, trying to learn something new."

With the full support of her family, MacLachlan decided to give herself a few years to become a published author. If the time passed and she was unsuccessful, she would give up and try a different profession. But she did get published, and in only one year! Her first book, *The Sick Day*, was released in 1979. It is a picture book about a little girl with a cold, whose father cares for her. One of the people who believed in MacLachlan's abilities as a writer early on was an editor (a person whose job it is to help authors develop their writing skills) named Charlotte Zolotow. She said that MacLachlan's writing is good because it is "filled with beautiful images, a poetic voice, and sensitive insights strung together like free verse."

MacLachlan's stories are usually about families. She has said that many of them, like *Sarah, Plain and Tall*; *The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt*; and *Cassie Binegar*, are partly autobiographical (a story about a person's life that is written by the person herself). MacLachlan describes them this way:

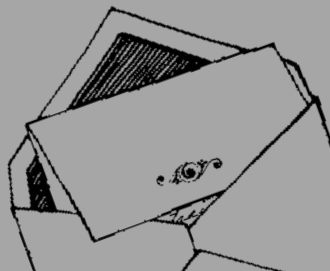
“My books derive chiefly from my family life, both as a child with my own parents as well as with my husband and kids.” *The Sick Day* was followed, very quickly, by many popular and successful titles, including *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Since then her books have won countless awards, including the Newbery Medal and the Christopher Award, which are two of the most distinguished awards a children’s writer can receive.

MacLachlan attributes her success to her family, for inspiring the themes she writes about and for being completely behind her when she chose to switch careers and become a writer. She says, “They have always supported the process as well as the end results.”

Writers don’t always have a regular paycheck coming to them, like people with other jobs, so this meant that while she was first starting out, MacLachlan’s family would have only her husband’s salary on which to live. He told Patricia, “What you’re doing is more important than money.” MacLachlan feels strongly that she would not have become the successful writer she is today if her husband had not given her time and space to develop her craft. She says, “. . . no one supported me more than my husband, Bob, who during the early single-salary years wouldn’t let me stop writing for a ‘real’ job.”

The MacLachlans now live in Massachusetts, where they spend part of the time at their house in Leeds and the rest of the time at their house on Cape Cod. Patricia continues to write, give lectures, and teach a course on children’s literature at Smith College.

How *Sarah, Plain and Tall* Came About



"Writing Sarah was in a sense, like a going back home."

—Patricia MacLachlan

In 1985, just six years after publishing her very first book, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* was released. The book received praise from children, parents, teachers, and literary critics alike. One critic even called *Sarah, Plain and Tall* "a near perfect miniature novel."

In 1986, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* won the John Newbery Medal from the American Library Association. The award is represented by the gold seal you may see on the book's cover. Every year, this honor is given to the author of the most distinguished piece of children's literature from the previous year. In her acceptance speech for the award, MacLachlan told the audience that it was her mother who inspired her to write this heartwarming story.

Patricia explained that when she was a child, her mother told her about a woman she knew who had moved from the coast of Maine to the prairie. This woman became a wife and mother to some family members of Patricia's mother. Yet it wasn't until her own children were preparing to go away to college that Patricia

made the connection between the story her mother had shared with her and her own memories of life on the prairie.

Before Patricia's children left for college, her parents took the MacLachlans on a trip to the prairie, where she and her parents had been born. MacLachlan spoke about this trip in her Newbery acceptance speech: "It was a gift for all of us, for the children to see a land they had never seen, to know family they had never met, to stand on the vast North Dakota farm where my father had been born in a sod house." The family trip to see her birthplace brought back many memories for her and her parents.

Memories were especially important for MacLachlan because her mother had developed Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's disease is a serious illness that causes a person to gradually lose her memory. Patricia told the Newbery audience, "Sarah speaks for me and my mother, for whom there are few words left. . . ."

MacLachlan says the desire to preserve the memories of her mother, and to tell the story of their family and of the prairie itself, propelled her to write *Sarah, Plain and Tall*: "When I began *Sarah*, I wished for several things and was granted something unexpected. Most of all I wished to write my mother's story with spaces, like the prairie, with silences that could say what words could not. . . . And in the end we are all there, my mother, my father, my husband, my children, and me."