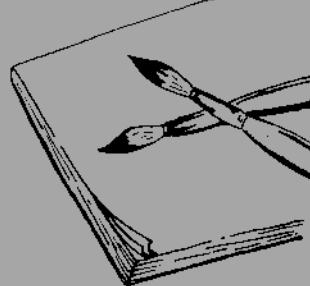


## About Katherine Paterson



"I write as a way to struggle with the questions life throws at me. I write for the young because we seem to be wrestling with the same questions."

—Katherine Paterson (1999)

**K**atherine Paterson, one of the most admired and honored children's-book authors today, did not grow up thinking she would one day be a writer. "I loved books," she has said, "and I read a great deal, but I never imagined that I might write them."

Katherine Paterson was born on October 31, 1932, in Huayin (formerly Qing Jiang), China. Her parents, George and Mary Womeldorf, were in China working as missionaries, doing religious and charitable work, on behalf of the Presbyterian Church.

Words were important to Paterson from the beginning. "My mother read to us regularly," she has said, "and because it opened up such a wonderful world, I taught myself to read before I entered school. Soon afterwards I began to write."

When war broke out between China and Japan in 1937, Katherine and her family were forced to leave China. They

relocated to North Carolina. Between the ages of five and eighteen, she moved eighteen times and attended thirteen different schools. “I remember the many schools I attended in those years mostly as places where I felt fear and humiliation. I was small, poor, and foreign. . . . I was a misfit both in the classroom and on the playground,” Paterson has said.

The author remembers that when she was in first grade she came home from school on February 14 without a single valentine. Years later, her mother asked her why she never wrote a story about the time she didn’t get any valentines. Paterson recalls responding, “But, Mother, *all* my stories are about the time I didn’t get any valentines.” Memories of being left out are woven throughout Paterson’s writing.

When Katherine was in fifth grade she earned her classmates’ respect by writing plays for them to act out. She still didn’t want to be a writer, however. “When I was ten,” Paterson has said, “I wanted to be either a movie star or a missionary.”

Katherine graduated from high school in 1950 and went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in English literature from King College in Bristol, Tennessee, in 1954. She then taught sixth grade for one year in rural Lovettsville, Virginia (the future setting of *Bridge to Terabithia*), before going on to earn a master’s degree in Christian education.

During graduate school, a teacher suggested to Paterson that she ought to become a writer. “I was appalled,” she remembers. “‘I don’t want to add another mediocre writer to the world,’ I said.”

The teacher told her that if she wasn't willing to risk mediocrity, she would never accomplish anything. But Katherine didn't pursue writing. Instead, following in her parents' footsteps, she became a missionary. A friend suggested she go to Japan, and Paterson ended up falling in love with the people and the country. In fact, she set her first children's novels in Japan.

In 1961 she went back to school at Union Theological Seminary in New York City for further study in Christian education. There Katherine met and fell in love with a fellow student, John Paterson, a Presbyterian minister. The couple married in 1962, and Katherine Paterson received her second master's degree in religious education that same year.

Paterson taught at the Pennington School for Boys in Pennington, New Jersey, until her first son was born in 1964. The Paterson family grew quickly: Within several years, the Patersons had one more son and adopted two daughters.

The year of her first child's birth was also the year Paterson accepted her first professional assignment as a writer. She was asked to create Sunday school curriculum units for the Presbyterian Church. Paterson has said, "I became a writer . . . without ever formulating the ambition to become one. When the curriculum assignment was completed, I turned to fiction, because that is what I most enjoy reading."

Paterson didn't become an overnight success. "I didn't know that wanting to write fiction and being able to write fiction were two quite separate things," she has said. "In the cracks of time

between feedings, diapering, cooking, reading aloud, walking to the park, . . . I wrote and wrote, and published practically nothing.” Paterson does not feel the time was wasted. “All those years when I couldn’t sell my stories,” she has said, “I was learning how to write.”

Paterson’s persistence proved that practice makes perfect, or pretty close. In 1973 she published her first novel, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*. In 1977 her third book, *The Master Puppeteer*, won the National Book Award in Children’s Literature.

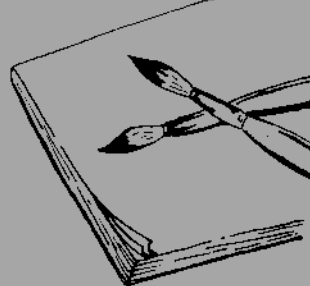
Paterson’s fourth and most popular book, *Bridge to Terabithia*, was published in 1977 and won the 1978 John Newbery Medal.

Since then, Paterson has written more than thirty books. She has twice won both the National Book Award and the American Library Association’s John Newbery Medal. And in 1998 the International Board on Books for Young People awarded Paterson the Hans Christian Andersen Medal—considered the world’s most prestigious award in children’s literature.

Paterson lives in Barre, Vermont, with her husband of more than forty years. What does she do in her free time? “I love to read,” Paterson has said. “I love to sing. I play both the piano and tennis badly, but still like to do them. I have a wonderful family.”

And, happily, she continues to write. “My gift seems to be that I am one of those fortunate people who can, if she works hard at it, uncover a story that children will enjoy.”

## How *Bridge to Terabithia* Came About



"Our son David's best friend... was struck and killed by lightning. It was trying to make sense of that tragedy that inspired me to write the book."

—Katherine Paterson

The year 1974 was a difficult one for the Paterson family. In the spring, Katherine Paterson was diagnosed with cancer. She had a successful operation to remove the tumor, but the experience frightened her and her family. They hadn't yet recovered from this brush with death when eight-year-old David Paterson's best friend, Lisa Hill, was struck and killed by lightning. "The two events were almost more than we could bear," Paterson has said.

So when she went to a meeting of children's-book writers and publishers in Washington, D.C., and someone asked her how her children were, she didn't answer with her usual "Fine." Instead, she poured out the tragic tale of Lisa Hill's death and her son David's grief. When she finished the story, a book editor said, "I know this sounds just like an editor, but you ought to write that story."

Not sure what else to do, Paterson began writing. “I wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* because I couldn’t do anything else,” she has said. “Of course, if I could’ve done anything I *wanted* to do, I would’ve brought Lisa back from the dead. But I couldn’t do that, and I couldn’t even comfort my son, who was totally distraught. So I did what writers often do when they can’t do what they really want to do. They write a story to make sense of something that doesn’t make sense. . . . So that’s why I began to write the book. And people always want me to say that it comforted my son, but no, it was really for me.”

Paterson wrote quickly at first, dozens and dozens of pages. But then one day, she says, she found herself “totally frozen. The time had come for my fictional child to die, and I could not let it happen.”

Paterson put the book aside until a friend asked how it was coming along. “I can’t let her die,” Paterson told her friend. “I can’t face going through Lisa’s death again.”

“Katherine,” her friend said, “I don’t think it’s Lisa’s death you can’t face, it’s yours.”

Hearing those words gave Paterson the push she needed to finish the book. “If it was my death I could not face,” she said, “then by God, I would face it.” Within a few weeks, Paterson had finished the first draft of the book.

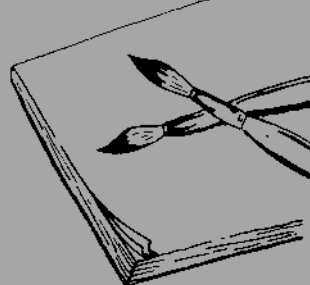
“I discovered gradually and not without a little pain that you don’t put together a bridge for a child. You become one—you lay

yourself across the chasm,” Paterson has said. “In writing this book, I have thrown my body across the chasm that most terrified me.”

Paterson hopes *Bridge to Terabithia* will help children deal with death by giving them practice before it actually happens. “I feel that *Bridge* is kind of a rehearsal that you go through to mourn somebody’s death that you care about,” Paterson has said.

While *Bridge to Terabithia* got its start in fact, Paterson has told her readers it is entirely fiction. “*Bridge* is loosely based on my son’s friendship and the death of his friend. But the resemblance stops there because they [David and Jess, Lisa and Leslie] are very different people. Their families are different. They live in a different place. So it is fiction and not fact, but it grew out of a real incident.”

## An Interview with Katherine Paterson



### **About *Bridge to Terabithia***

*You wrote Bridge to Terabithia after your eight-year-old son's best friend, Lisa Hill, was struck and killed by lightning. How did writing this book help you? How do you think this book might help others?*

Lisa's death made no sense to me. It was tragic, totally unexpected, devastating. I did what writers often do when they can't make sense out of life. I tried to shape my question into a story. Stories have to make sense—not in a logical, reasonable sense so much as an emotional sense. The ending has to somehow clarify for the reader (and first, the writer) the beginning and middle.

*Terabithia was Jess and Leslie's secret place. You've said that you had lots of Terabithias as a child, and that now your secret place is inside of you. Why do you think people need secret places?*

My feeling is that if you don't have a secret place—a place where your imagination can run wild and you can ask yourself any question with no one censoring your thoughts—it's hard to grow

either spiritually or intellectually. You may just keep trying to be and think what those around you seem to want.

*Bridge to Terabithia has been criticized by some for its profanity and disrespect for adults, and was on People for the American Way's list of challenged books four times in the 1990s. What do you say to the people who want to remove this book from classrooms and libraries?*

Well, first, I'd hope they would read the whole book for themselves with as open a mind as possible. Then I would ask that they leave the book for the many people who have read it and found profound comfort in it. I don't think they would have been able to find that comfort if Jesse Aarons had not seemed real to them. He speaks like children I have known in that part of the world. I tried to be true to the child he was, not make him an example of proper language or behavior.

*You used the Japanese word banzai, which means "hooray!" and "live forever," in the dedication of Bridge to Terabithia. Why did you choose this word?*

Because when I thought of the friendships between David and Lisa and Jess and Leslie that is how I felt.

## **About being a writer**

*When do you write? Will you describe a typical day for us?*

I am a morning person. Often during the first draft of the book I'll get up at about 5:30 A.M. to write. Nobody else much is awake. No one calls me on the phone or rings the doorbell. Nor is my critical, judgmental mind awake yet. I can play with a book like a child plays, and no one is there to interrupt or criticize. When I am rewriting, which is where the real fun comes, it doesn't matter who calls or criticizes, I'm having too much fun to let it bother me much.

*You have said that the hardest part of writing a book is getting started, yet you've managed to start, and finish, about thirty books. How do you get over this difficult hurdle?*

Oh, dear. If I could answer that one, I'd have a lot more than thirty books to my credit. I spend a lot of time just fiddling around with ideas, throwing most of them away, until finally one magic day, the cluster of ideas that will become a book comes together and I can begin.

*Lots of writers—young and old—hate revisions, yet you love them. Why? Also, about how many times do you revise each book before it is done?*

As I have often said: Revisions are about the only place in life where spilt milk can be turned into ice cream. I love revisions

because you can take that big chunk of granite you blasted out of the earth and hoisted out (the first draft) and use your fine chisels and tools and turn it into something beautiful. Each book is different. I just keep writing until three people love it: 1. me 2. my husband 3. my editor.

*What's your favorite thing about being a writer? What is your least favorite?*

I love, I am overwhelmed by, the mysterious, almost mystical relationship between writer and reader. I am thrilled whenever something that came out of my depths touches someone else in a deep way.

I guess the hardest thing—therefore what I must like least—is getting started. I find ideas worthy of a book very hard to come by.

*What advice do you have for children who would like to be writers? What do you suggest they write about?*

Read. Read. Read. That's the way you learn how language works, how stories, essays, and poetry work. Write, too, of course, but not instead of reading.

When I first started trying to be a writer (and I was more than thirty years old) people kept saying, "Write what you know." Well, if I wrote what I knew, I could hardly write. I write to find out, mostly. I think you should write what you are most passionate

about or what you most want to know about or explore. Don't write about anything unless you care deeply about it.

## **General**

*You moved eighteen times by the time you were eighteen. How has having moved around so much as a child influenced the stories you tell, the books you write?*

I was constantly the outsider looking in. I think most writers are.

*You have said that discovering the school library when you were a child saved your life. How do books have the power to save and to heal?*

The library gave me books where I found friends—other children like myself who were lonely and frightened and friendless. Also, unlike the playground, where I was bullied, and the classroom where I was humiliated, the library was a safe, accepting environment. I do love librarians.

*Which of the books you read as a child would you recommend to a ten- to twelve-year-old reader today?*

*The Yearling* was my favorite book when I was eleven–twelve. I still love it.

*You describe yourself as a very private person who is also a show-off. How does writing satisfy these contrary aspects of your personality?*

When I took a personality test a number of years ago, I fell off the introverted side of the chart. This doesn't mean I don't like people. I do. It just means that being with people, especially when I'm playing famous person, is exhausting to me. I come home a zombie. But closed up in my little study writing for a day fills me with life and energy. It may seem contradictory to say that I love to perform. I acted in many plays when I was young and adored it. But performing is quite different from trying to have a conversation with someone you've just met. I keep practicing, though. I want to be friendly in these situations, but it's hard for me.

*What's one thing, besides writing, that you're really good at?*

*What's one thing that you're really bad at?*

I'm good at reading, especially out loud. Sports, alas. I love sports and went out for sports in school, practiced every afternoon and sat on the bench every game. I don't like to watch sports much. I want to be part of the team. I guess that's why I like singing in the choir. I'm part of a team and haven't been benched yet.