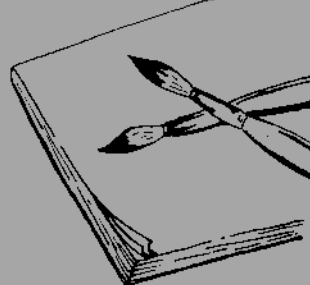


Katherine Paterson on Writing



Katherine Paterson believes being a writer is “the best job in the world.” The author of more than thirty books has said, “I love to write. If I’m not writing for a period of time, I feel lost.”

While Paterson loves being a writer, she admits it’s hard work. “You can’t wait for inspiration to strike,” she has said. “You go to work every morning. It’s day labor.”

Paterson gets her ideas “from life, observation, reading, dreams. Sometimes they just seem to come out of the blue and I have no idea of the actual source.”

This author’s favorite subject is people. While she always knows something about her characters before she begins a book, she really gets to know them in the writing. Before writing, “I have to know where they were born, what was happening in their family before they were born,” she has said. “After I finish the first draft, I know them better. When I rewrite, I see the things that they would never have said or never have done. . . . So with each rewriting, I get to know them better.”

While Paterson gets to know her characters as she writes, she makes sure she knows as much as possible about the setting before she begins. “I’m a great believer in research,” Paterson has

said. "I have to know about a place before I write a story that is set in that place."

For Paterson, one of the toughest parts of her job is writing the first draft. "First drafts are usually painful," the author has said. "The first draft is always messy and horrible." But once she's written the first draft, once she can look at it and say "Not bad," Paterson gets to begin doing what she really loves: rewriting. "A good rewrite morning is bliss," the author has said. "Where else in life can spilled milk be transformed into ice cream?"

Sometimes, Paterson can't remember the bliss. "There are days when I wonder how on earth I got involved in this madness," she has said. "Why . . . did I ever think I had anything to say that was worth putting down on paper? And there are those days when I have finished a book and can't for the life of me believe I'll ever have the wit or will to write another.

"Eventually a character or characters will walk into my imagination and begin to take over my life. I'll spend the next couple of years getting to know them and telling their story. Then the joy of writing far outweighs the struggle, and I know beyond a doubt that I am the most fortunate person in the world to have been given such work to do."

For aspiring writers

When asked what advice she has for young writers, Paterson has said, "Read, because that's the way you learn how the language works. That's the way you learn about emotion, on paper. That's

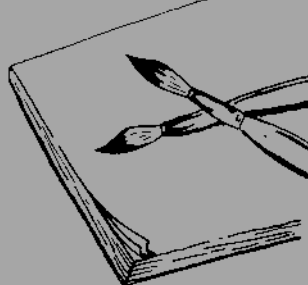
where you find out how stories are fastened, by reading and reading and reading. And you just absorb it. Nobody's giving you rules in working it out. You're *learning*, and you're enjoying it while you're learning—which is very important.”

The author also tells prospective writers to write. And rewrite. “My first draft is usually a mess,” Paterson has said. “Sometimes I become so discouraged that I want to pitch it rather than rewrite it. . . . Never become discouraged or give up because your first draft is a mess. Work hard to revise it, even if you have to do it many, many times! Good writers are hard workers!”

Paterson's own persistence is how she got to be where she is today. “All those years when I couldn't sell my stories, I was learning how to write. I found that a writer must give her heart as well as her mind to her work. I learned to love the process of revising a book, going over and over it until I was sure it was the best I could do.”

The author also tells aspiring writers to use their imaginations. “The old idea was that you have to live an exciting life to write good books,” Paterson has said. “I believe that you have to have a rich imaginative life. You don't have to fight dragons to write books. You just have to live deeply the life you've been given.”

You Be the Author!



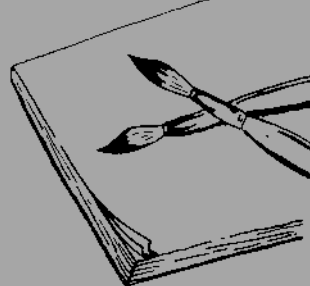
- **Set the place:** Paterson is a great believer in research and has to know all about a place before she sets a story there. Think of a story you'd like to write. Where does it take place? Research that setting. Take notes to help you remember details to include in your story. For example, what is the geography like? Are there any landmarks? What is the weather like? What plants and animals are found in the area? Use these details to make a believable setting.
- **Make ice cream (in other words, revise):** Paterson says revising is a way of turning spilled milk into ice cream. Take a story, poem, or essay you have written and revise it to make it the best it can be. As you revise, ask yourself: Does this make sense? Does one idea follow another? Is this the best word I can use here? Is there too much or too little information? Is there unnecessary information?
- **Play time:** Among Paterson's first writings—when she was ten or so—were plays she wrote for her classmates to act in. Try writing a play for your family, friends, or classmates to act in. If you have difficulty writing an original play, you might want to start by adapting a short story or a book into a play, then make your next play original.

- **Favorite hobby:** In *Bridge to Terabithia*, Mrs. Myers asks her fifth-grade class to write a paper about their favorite hobby. Leslie's essay about scuba diving is so good that "the power of Leslie's words drew Jess with her under the dark water." Write a few paragraphs about your favorite hobby, and try to write it so that it has the power to move your reader or listener the way Leslie's did.

- **Draw with words:** Paterson uses wonderfully descriptive language to paint pictures that place the reader in her story. One tool she uses is *similes*, figures of speech in which two unlike things are compared using the words *like* or *as*. Here are two examples: "Surprise swooshed up from the class like steam from a released radiator cap" and "the boys quivered on the edges of their seats like moths fighting to be freed of cocoons."

Try using similes in your own writing. You might start by brainstorming a list of similes for such things as surprise, excitement, sadness, nervousness, happiness, and fear.

Activities



- **Sell the book:** Imagine you've been asked to design a cover for *Bridge to Terabithia* that will make more young people pick it up and read it. What would your cover look like? What image or images would you include on the front? Make your new cover. On the back, write a review of the book that you think will make others want to read it. Don't retell the whole story just tell enough to let a potential reader know what it is about and to interest her or him in reading the whole book.
- **Visit a museum:** When Miss Edmunds takes Jess to Washington and learns that it is his first trip to an art gallery, she says, "Great. My life has been worthwhile after all." If you've never been to a museum or art gallery, ask an adult to take you. If you have been, go again. If it's not possible to visit an art gallery in person, borrow an art book from the library and visit through photographs. As you look at the different kinds of art, whether in person or through a book, ask yourself if any of them make you feel as strongly as Jess felt when he viewed the pieces of artwork in the gallery.
- **Make a diorama:** One of the pieces of art that most moves Jess at the Smithsonian is a diorama of Indians disguised in buffalo skins scaring a herd of buffalo into stampeding over a cliff to their deaths. Jess describes this art as "a three-dimensional nightmare version of some of his own drawings." Make a diorama

based on this book. It could be a copy of the one Jess saw at the Smithsonian, or it could be another scene from the book, such as Jess and Leslie racing the first day of school, swinging over to Terabithia, or Jess leading May Belle over the bridge into Terabithia.

- **Winning ways:** Katherine Paterson won the 1978 John Newbery Medal for *Bridge to Terabithia*. Read one or two other Newbery-winning books, and think about what it takes to be a winner. Some recent Newbery Medal-winning books are:

Crispin: The Cross of Lead by Avi (2003)

A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park (2002)

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck (2001)

Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis (2000)

Holes by Louis Sachar (1999)

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse (1998)

The View from Saturday by E. L. Konigsburg (1997)

The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman (1996)

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech (1995)

The Giver by Lois Lowry (1994)

Missing May by Cynthia Rylant (1993)

- **Draw Terabithia:** Leslie tells Jess, “You should draw a picture of Terabithia for us to hang in the castle.” Jess says, “I can’t. . . . I just can’t get the poetry of the trees.” See if you can get the poetry of the trees. Draw a picture of Terabithia as you imagine it to be.

- **What is a hippie?:** Jess’s mom and many of his classmates call Miss Edmunds a hippie. Research what a hippie is, and

decide for yourself whether or not Miss Edmunds fits that description. After that, decide whether you think being a hippie is a good or bad thing and why Jess's parents and his classmates might think it's a bad thing.

- **“Free to Be . . . You and Me”:** Find the words to the 1972 song “Free to Be . . . You and Me” that Miss Edmunds sings when she first meets Leslie. Then, make a picture book about the importance of being yourself by using the lyrics and your own illustrations.

- **Washington, D.C., landmarks:** When Jess is driving into Washington with Miss Edmunds, he recognizes all the landmarks, “looking surprisingly the way the books had pictured them.” Imagine you are planning a trip to Washington. Research the landmarks. Then, make a simple map for yourself showing where these landmarks are in relation to one another. Be sure to include the two places Jess visited: the National Gallery and the Smithsonian.

- **Make a trail mix:** In Terabithia, Jess and Leslie snack on crackers and dried fruit. You can make your own special snack—a trail mix—to bring with you when you visit your own special place or places. While you can vary the mix based on what you like and have available, here is a basic recipe to get you started: Combine equal parts peanuts and/or any kind of nut you like (just be sure that you and whoever else will be eating the trail mix are not allergic to what you use), dried fruit (such as raisins, dried apricots, dates, figs, prunes), and chocolate candies (chocolate chips and/or M&M's® work nicely) in an unbreakable container or plastic bag. Carry it to your own special place and enjoy!