

About Jean Craighead George



"I had much to paint and write about."

—Jean Craighead George

From a very early age, Jean Craighead George was very ambitious. She remembers being six years old and deciding that she would be not only a writer, but also an illustrator, a dancer, a poet, and a mother. Did she follow *all* of these dreams? She did—and then some! She began writing in the third grade, and hasn't stopped since. She has written more than one hundred books.

Jean Craighead was born on July 2, 1919, in Washington, D.C. Her dad, Frank C. Craighead, was an entomologist (a scientist who studies insects) and a botanist (a scientist who studies plants). Her mother, Mary, and her brothers, aunts, and uncles were also students of nature. Jean and her older twin brothers, John and Frank, grew up spending their summers in the wilderness along the Potomac River.

It was during these summers that Jean says her father taught her about trees, flowers, birds, and insects, and even how to find and harvest wild foods. Jean was always drawn to the outdoors. She liked to fish, play softball, swim, catch frogs, and ride

around in hay wagons with her brothers. Jean Craighead read lots of classic literature and kept journals of what she saw and learned during her summers along the river with her family. She developed a sense of respect for nature and the earth. “I had much to paint and write about,” she has said.

Jean Craighead went to college at Pennsylvania State University, where she earned degrees in science and literature. After college, she was a reporter for the *The Washington Post* newspaper and worked for the White House Press Corps as a reporter covering news at the White House. She found journalism exciting and says: “I met senators, diplomats and the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.” She got married in 1944 to John Lothar George, who was the college roommate of one of her brothers. Her name then became Jean Craighead George. John was in the Navy at the time, serving in World War II. After the war ended, Jean and John went to Michigan so that John could attend the University of Michigan and earn his doctorate (PhD). They both wanted to understand nature better, so the two lived in a tent in a maple forest while they were there. Jean says, “It was here that I truly came to understand the beauty and complexity of the natural world.”

At first, Jean wrote books with her husband. The first one, *Vulpes the Red Fox*, came out in 1948. The two wrote this and several more animal biographies together. They based the books on real-life experiences they had with animals they took in from the wild and kept as pets. Their writing partnership was very successful. In fact, they even won an award for best nature writing for their book *Dipper of Copper Creek*.

Jean was very excited to become a mother. The first child she and John had was a daughter, whom they named Carolyn Laura but call Twig, because she was so tiny. The Georges moved to Poughkeepsie, New York, just north of New York City. Two years later, they had a son, John Craighead, whom they call Craig. Four years after that, John and Jean had another son, Thomas Luke, whom they call Luke.

Jean loves being a mother. When her kids were young, she brought wild animals into the house for them to learn about. First Jean wrote about the animals themselves, and then about her children interacting with the animals. "I kept on writing and illustrating, for this is what I did well because I loved it."

In 1957, the family moved to neighboring Chappaqua, New York, when John took a job working at the Bronx Zoo. Jean continued her writing. She gained the greatest recognition when she began writing books on her own. In 1959, *My Side of the Mountain* was published. This is one of Jean Craighead George's best-known books. It is a survival story about a boy named Sam Gibley. She based the story on her childhood experiences with her father and twin brothers. It was written as her own children napped and slept at night.

In 1964, Jean and John divorced. Jean stayed in Chappaqua and continued to write. She wrote articles for *Reader's Digest* and continued to write books for both children and adults. She traveled across America with her children, taking them to places where they could study animals and plants. They climbed mountains together, hiked deserts, and went canoeing on rivers.

Her observations while on these trips became material for her books.

It was after a trip to Alaska in 1970 with her youngest child, Luke, that Jean returned home and wrote *Julie of the Wolves*. The book tells the story of a brave Eskimo girl who gets lost on the Alaskan tundra while running away from home. The heroine forms a close bond with wild wolves. They help her survive. The book was published in 1972, and in 1973, it received the John Newbery Medal. This honor is given to the author of the most distinguished piece of children's literature from the previous year. Just a few years after it was published, *Julie of the Wolves* was picked by the Children's Literature Association as one of the 10 best American children's books in the past 200 years.

Jean Craighead George's children are grown now, but they share their mother's love of nature and writing. They all went to college, and now Twig is a children's-book writer, just like her mom. Craig studies whales in Alaska and writes articles for scientific journals. Luke is a college professor in California and also writes articles for scientific journals. George says, "We are all deeply connected by our early love of the outdoors."

Jean Craighead George still lives in Chappaqua, New York, where she enjoys spending time reading to her five grandchildren when they visit. She still travels once a year with her family. They go to places like Maine, Hawaii, the rain forests of Belize, or to see the coral reefs in the Caribbean. She still writes books and is actively involved in trying to get new environmental protection bills passed through Congress.

How *Julie of the Wolves* Came About



"I love their devotion to each other. They stay together partly for economic reasons, but mainly because of their deep affection and loyalty."

—Jean Craighead George, on wolves

Before writing *Julie of the Wolves*, Jean Craighead George first researched wolf behavior. She read about them and learned that wolves are friendly and form well-run societies, like people do. Wolves communicate with one another using a combination of sight, sound, scent, color, and posture. This excited Jean and she wanted to learn more.

In 1970, she took her youngest son, Luke, on a trip to Alaska. She went because she was writing an article for *Reader's Digest* on wolves. They went to the Arctic Research Laboratory in the city of Barrow. Jean and Luke spent time doing professional research with the scientists at the laboratory.

The scientists observed the *Canis lupus*, which are gray wolves. From these scientists Jean learned about wolf communication firsthand. She was taught to give wolves a submissive grin, how to grunt-whine to get their attention in a friendly way, and to say

hello to them by smiling with her mouth open. Jean became aware that wild wolves will approach a human who is on hands and knees but not one who is standing. She also learned about the mated pair of dominant wolves, called alphas, in each pack.

After studying with the scientists for a while, Jean and Luke went to Denali State Park in Alaska, where they lay on their bellies and observed wolves in their natural environment. George encountered a magnificent alpha-male wolf while she was there. He was the leader of a pack that lived in the state park.

Jean and Luke also noticed some people in Alaska who made an impression on them. When the two flew into Barrow, Luke happened to see a young Eskimo girl out on the tundra and remarked that she was “awfully little to be out there alone.” Later on in their trip, Jean and Luke actually found themselves lost for a little while. They couldn’t find their way on the flat tundra, which had no landmarks to guide them.

It was also on this trip that George met the woman on whom she based Miyax’s (Julie’s) character. She says, “A woman named Julia Sebevan took me in and told me about the old ways of the Eskimos.” George still treasures a parka that Julia made for her, baleen (a portion of a whale’s jaw) given to her by Julia’s son, and, most of all, the relationship she formed with this woman and her family.

The alpha-male wolf, the little girl wandering the tundra alone, and Julia Sebevan all stayed in Jean’s memories for a long time after she and Luke returned home. She says, “They haunted me

for a year or more, as did the words of one of the scientists at the lab.” The scientist told her that he no longer felt there was any doubt that a man could live with the wolves. He said that wolves are highly social and affectionate.

She decided to create a book using all she had learned about the tundra (its harsh climate and conditions), the wolves (from the scientists in Barrow and on her own), and the Eskimo people. She had no idea that *Julie of the Wolves* would become an award-winning book when she set out to write it. In fact, she says, “I thought I’d be severely criticized because it dealt with communication between man and wolf. At that time, the first experiments were just being run on animal communication. I didn’t think an audience would tolerate it. But they did. They loved it.”

An Interview with Jean Craighead George



When you left Julie of the Wolves open-ended, what did you hope readers would imagine Julie did next?

The final sentence, “Julie pointed her boots toward Kapugen,” is an Eskimo ending, meaning that it is open-ended with a big clue as to what is next. I changed Julie’s name from the Eskimo Miyax, which I call her while she is on the tundra with the wolves, to Julie, which is her American/Western culture name. That in itself is an ending. I hope the readers will understand that Julie went home to her father, knowing he is not perfect but loving him anyway and that she is going to try to adapt to the new world of change that has come to the Eskimo.

Why did you write sequels to Julie of the Wolves?

Long ago students and readers asked me to write more about Julie, but I felt I did not know enough about the Eskimo culture until my son, Craig, moved to Barrow, Alaska, to study the bowhead whale. He settled down there. For years I visited him and his family (I still do) and came to know his wonderful native friends. Twenty-one years later, I felt ready to write the sequel to *Julie of the Wolves*—and I did. That book is *Julie*. As for *Julie’s*

Wolf Pack (third in the trilogy), I would have written that book sooner, but the relationship of the wolves in a pack was only guesswork. Then came [a greater understanding of] DNA and Dr. L. David Mech, [who] sampled almost a dozen Arctic [wolf] packs and found the truth. The alphas are strangers who meet and mate. The first pups spend the year learning from their parents and stay on to help with the next litter of pups. The aunts and uncles take positions in the pack according to their talents—some are good hunters, some swift runners. When a pack needs a wolf to replace a lost member, the alphas will “invite” one into the pack. A wolf pack is a very nice society.

How involved have you been in the creation of the movie, Julie of the Wolves? When is it being released?

The movie is on hold. The screenplay was getting too far from the book, and so I did not sign the option [part of a contract] when it ran out. Someone will do it right. At present, a musical [theater] version of *Julie of the Wolves* is in the workshop stage of development and is breathtaking it is so beautiful.

If you found yourself in a situation similar to Julie's, do you think you would have managed as well as she did?

I certainly would not have managed as well as Julie did in the same situation. Although my father, like Julie's father, taught me to hunt and fish and find delicious wild plants in the Eastern forests, I did not have the cultural sense of survival that Julie had. I could have made it for a few days in my Eastern woods,

but since Dad taught me to follow a stream when lost because it leads to people, I would have been down that stream and out of the woods in a short time.

*What would you say is the most important message you convey to readers in *Julie of the Wolves*?*

I hope that the message I conveyed in *Julie of the Wolves* is to tell young people to think things out. Think independently.

What is your writing process? When and how do you write? Can you describe a typical day (setting, time of day, etc.)?

My writing process is a mix of research, personal experiences, washing the dishes, raising kids while thinking—then writing. I get up about five or five thirty [in the morning], shower, have breakfast and do all those personal things—even answer e-mail. Then I sit down at the computer and write. By this time I have done all the footwork—studied an animal, talked to scientists who are experts, camped in the area I am writing about to learn the ecology, and thought out a story. I think up the story when I am cooking or vacuuming the house or doing other jobs that don't take much mental work. Sometimes the animal I am writing about has done something that makes a story and sometimes it is a young boy or girl who is the secret. I do like to put kids in my nature books because as a lovely Eskimo woman said to me, "People are nature, too." Around three o'clock I give up, go swimming, find a friend, or call one of my three children and five grandchildren and listen to their adventures. Grandson Luke

went camping on the tundra (he lives in Barrow, Alaska), granddaughter Caity (Maryland) wrote a short story about the mall. Grandson Hunter (California) fed a raven cheese.

What type of writing do you find the toughest? the easiest?

The hardest writing is when I don't know enough about a subject to "let it flow." The easiest for me is telling a story. I love to tell stories.

If you weren't a writer, what might you be?

... I suppose I could paint houses for a living, or deliver newspapers, but I have wanted to be a writer since I was in third grade and haven't developed any other skills. My thoughts then were that if I wasn't good enough to be a writer, I could dance, canoe, paint pictures, be a politician, or help a librarian put books back on the shelves. But I never perfected any of those desires, so it is fortunate that I stuck to my love.

Do you have any advice for young aspiring writers?

My advice to young writers is to write, write, write and read, read, read. Then go out in the world and listen and observe. Writing even a line or two every day will help you attain the discipline that is needed to write. And, if you don't truly love every minute of it, try something else.

When you're not writing, what do you enjoy doing?

When I am not writing I enjoy hiking, bird-watching, going to the theater, and painting pictures. I am leaving soon to watch the wolves of Yellowstone National Park, a favorite pastime. I also like to drive to the Hudson River, get a hot dog from the vendor, and sit on the riverbank and eat it. I like lunch or dinner with my friends and visiting my kids.

Do you have any new books coming out soon?

I have three books coming out soon: *Firestorm* and *Snowboard Twist*, both illustrated by Wendell Minor, and *Charlie's Ravens*. Three others are "in the works."

You've said that you have taken in many different pets from the wild. Do you still do this? What pets (even if not wild) do you have?

I cannot have wild pets anymore. Today there are many rules governing the raising of wild things, and I do not have a permit to do this. However, I have an African gray parrot whose name is Tocca Two. (*Tocca* means sunshine in Swahili.) She says, "Who let the dogs out, who, who who who," "What the heck, let's go fishing," "Galápagos George," "Here comes that durn squirrel," and much, much more. I just told her I was busy writing and she said, "Who cares!"