



## Jean Craighead George on Writing

*"I kept on writing and illustrating,  
for this is what I did well because  
I loved it."*

—Jean Craighead George

Jean Craighead George loves to write. She has been doing it since she was a little girl. From the time she was in the third grade she knew that she wanted to be a writer. Each day, beginning right after breakfast until three o'clock in the afternoon, Jean writes. She has always loved words, and writing gives her a way to share her knowledge and ideas with children and adults.

Jean Craighead George's main motivation for writing is to share with readers her love of nature. She says, "All I wish to do is tell the story of our North American animals and plants, hoping my readers will come to love them as I do in all their magnificence." When people read her books, they gain an appreciation of the animals she writes about. Her books can turn people who don't know much about animals into animal lovers. For people who already adore animals, her writing can make those feelings even stronger.

Another reason Jean Craighead George enjoys writing is because she wants to teach young people new things. Some readers are just beginning to learn about the natural world, and she makes it come to life. By reading her books, young people learn without even realizing it. She says, "I really believe in stories to bring children into knowledge. You can hang so much information on a good story, and they aren't even aware they're getting it, but pretty soon they know the whole ecology of the tundra and the life history of the wolf and they want more and they go to other books." Jean finds that once her readers get a small sample of how interesting the natural world can be by reading her books, they just want to know more and more.

Jean Craighead George's books are dramatic partly because her writing is so beautiful. But they are also compelling because she includes many true-to-life details. She thinks it's very important to give her readers an accurate picture of the worlds she creates in her books. She says, "We [adults] owe children reliable knowledge. The very best we can give them." To do this, George researches her books very thoroughly. She spends time reading about and visiting the places in her stories so that she can give exact information about them. Before she wrote *Julie of the Wolves*, Jean visited Barrow, Alaska, and studied wolves, the land and climate of the tundra, as well as the traditions and teachings of native Inuit people. She did this to make sure that her book was as real and true as possible.

To come up with her characters, Jean Craighead George often makes them a bit like herself or people she knows well, like her brothers. For example, Miyax's character is a little like Jean

herself. Jean says, “Most writers put a bit of themselves into their characters.” Then she takes the character she has created and thinks of a problem that the character needs to solve. George says that she finds ideas for her stories in everything she encounters. “I’m asleep if I can’t get any ideas for writing. Ideas are everywhere. Your shoes must have been many places with tales to tell. The rain coming down the windowpane is a tale to tell—and on and on,” she says.

When Jean won the John Newbery Medal for *Julie of the Wolves*, it meant so much to her because it was a sign that she had touched children’s lives. She had made something that affected children in a positive way. She says, “. . . the Newbery medal meant more to me than the Nobel or the Pulitzer Prize because it reached into childhood, into those years where books and characters last a lifetime.”

## You Be the Author!



- **And then?:** *Julie of the Wolves* ends with the sentence, “Julie pointed her boots toward Kapugen.” The reader isn’t sure what Miyax’s future holds now that she has discovered that Kapugen is alive. Pick up where Jean Craighead George leaves off and write the next scene in the story. Will Miyax go back to her father? Will she decide to head back out into the wild by herself? You decide!

- **Pen it!:** In *Julie of the Wolves*, Miyax and Amy are pen pals. A pen pal is a buddy with whom you write back and forth, telling him or her about your life, where you live, your family, whatever is happening to you that you want to share. Find a pen pal for yourself! You can do this over e-mail, or the “snail mail” way by sending a letter through the post office. Make sure you check with an adult before corresponding over the Internet. Check out Kids’ Space Connection at [www.ks-connection.org](http://www.ks-connection.org) for international pen pals.

- **Colors paint a picture:** When Miyax is at the seal camp with Kapugen, her memories are formed with colors. She associates each thing she encounters there with its colors. These colors create beautiful memories in her mind. Think about things that happened in you past. What colors do you remember seeing as they were happening? Do you remember the sand and ocean

from a trip to the beach? Do you remember the snow and sleds from a snow day? Do you remember the uniforms from a sports outing? Whatever colors you remember, write about a memory by describing it with colors.

- **Animal tales:** *Julie of the Wolves* is the story of a girl interacting with wolves. She becomes as close to the wolves as many people become to each other. Is there an animal you care about a great deal? Write about your relationship with an animal or animals. This could be a pet, or a wild animal, or even an animal in a zoo. Even if the animal is no longer alive, what did it mean to you? What experiences did you have with this animal? What did it teach you?

- **Seasons of change:** As Miyax's story progresses, the seasons of the tundra progress, too. She gets lost in the summer, while the grasses still grow. But by the time she finds Kapugen, winter has come. What are the seasons like where you live? Write about them in a journal as they change over the course of the year.

## Activities



- **Sing!:** Miyax makes up a song about Amaroq that she sings to praise him. Create a song of your own about something that interests you. Make up lyrics and a melody for it. Your song can be funny or silly, happy or sad. Sing about an animal, as Miyax does, or about things like school, or nature, or your family.
- **Locate it:** Where in the world is Alaska? Locate Alaska on a map of the United States. Where is the land that is tundra? Where are the cities and villages that Miyax lives in during the course of the book? Do you see Barrow? What about Mekoryuk? Make a map of Alaska for yourself. Be sure to clearly mark all the important places from the book.
- **Be a researcher:** Jean Craighead George did lots of thorough research before she wrote *Julie of the Wolves*. Go to your local library or jump onto the Internet to find out more about a portion of the book. Look up Arctic wolves or seals. Find out more about the tundra or Eskimo culture. You could even try to see some of these things in person. Even if you can't take a trip to Alaska, you can head to your local zoo to observe the animals there!
- **Cover to cover:** The cover of *Julie of the Wolves* shows Miyax (Julie) and Amaroq. The front cover of a book is important because it is what makes a first impression on the reader. It should reflect something meaningful or important about the

book. If you were given the job of designing the book's cover, what picture would you use? Draw a new cover for *Julie of the Wolves* using images from the book that mean the most to you.

- **Speak the language:** Miyax is an Eskimo, or Inuit. The reader learns that her Inuit name is Miyax and her English name is Julie. Look up your own name to see what the closest Inuit word is for it. Then, look up the names of your family and friends. Find out what the Inuit word is for your favorite food or animal. Learn to say hello and good-bye. Then, teach your friends to say things in Inuit. It can be your secret code! Check out the University of Oregon's Yamada Language Center on Inuit/Inuktitut for lots of links to Inuit language resources: <http://babel.uoregon.edu/yamada/guides/inuit.html>.

- **Keep reading!:** After writing *Julie of the Wolves*, Jean Craighead George wrote two more books about Miyax. Are you curious about what is going to happen to Miyax when *Julie of the Wolves* ends? Find out! Go to your local library or bookstore and check out *Julie*, the sequel to *Julie of the Wolves*. Then, read *Julie's Wolf Pack*, the third book in the Julie series by Jean Craighead George.

- **Be an activist:** Jean Craighead George takes pride in the fact that she petitions for the safety and security of the environment. Help save endangered species of wolves and other animals around the world. Check out the following nonprofit organizations to find out what you can do to help these magnificent animals:

Defenders of Wildlife

[www.defenders.org/wupdate.html](http://www.defenders.org/wupdate.html)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Endangered Species

[www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

Wildlife Conservation Society

[www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org)

Wolf Education and Research Center

[www.wolfcenter.org](http://www.wolfcenter.org)

World Wildlife Fund

[www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org)