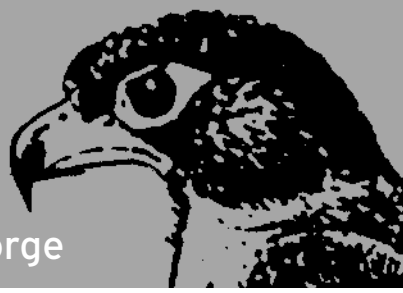


About Jean Craighead George



"I can remember very clearly being six and deciding that when I grew up I would become an illustrator, a writer, a dancer, a poet, and [a] mother."

—Jean Craighead George

Jean Craighead George considers herself very lucky to have had parents who supported her interests. They sent her to dancing school, made sure she had a writing desk, and even had summer and winter homes that satisfied their daughter's urge to ice-skate and swim. Early on, they encouraged her and let her decide who and what she wanted to be. Jean's mother and her aunt Polly had a motto: "Be different. Never follow the crowd."

In time, Jean realized that the greatest gift her parents gave her was a love of nature.

Born in Washington, D.C., on July 2, 1919, Jean Craighead grew up in a family of naturalists. Jean's family encouraged her to immerse herself in her natural surroundings. Jean found that she felt a close bond with the land and the animals. Her childhood was filled with experiences that inspired and influenced her writing. Jean's father was an entomologist, a

scientist who studies insects. He often took Jean and her brothers into the wilderness along the Potomac River near their home. He taught his children how to make lean-tos and fish with homemade fishhooks and lines. As if she knew she might write a book about wilderness survival someday, Jean paid close attention as her father taught her where to find edible plants, as well as other wilderness survival skills. And the family all trained falcons, too. In fact, Jean's brothers were two of the first falconers in the United States. At the age of thirteen, Jean was given a falcon of her own to train!

At a young age, Jean discovered an outlet for her thoughts: writing. Jean has said, "I first became aware of the delights of the natural world when my father, an entomologist, presented me with what looked like a twig. When it got up and walked, my delight was such that I wrote a poem, 'To a Walking Stick.' I was in the third grade and have been writing ever since." In 1937, when Jean entered Pennsylvania State University, she discovered that her upbringing was different from that of her peers. "No one was more surprised than me when I got to college and found out that not everybody wrote and kept turkey vultures and owls in their backyard. I thought everyone lived with a closeness to nature. I wrote about [the natural world] because I knew it and loved it." In 1941, Jean graduated with degrees in English and science. Years later, in 1968, Jean Craighead George was honored by her university. She was named Woman of the Year.

Before becoming a full-time author, George tried several other exciting careers, including a job as a member of the White House

press corps and one as a reporter for the *Washington Post* newspaper. She was also a nature writer for *Reader's Digest*.

No matter what she did, though, Jean Craighead George never lost sight of what she loved most: experiencing and writing about the natural world.

In 1944, Jean married John George. Four years later, she published her first book, *Vulpes the Red Fox*, which she cowrote with her husband. Jean kept writing while raising her three children, Craig, Luke, and Twig. When she was exploring nature on hikes and canoe trips Jean took her children with her. Jean took notes and made observations. Returning home, she would write while the children slept—turning her thoughts about the wilderness and the animals around her into the setting and the characters of her exceptional stories. Soon, Jean became well-known for weaving her extensive knowledge and love of nature into books for children.

Jean Craighead George has now written more than ninety books for young readers—among them *My Side of the Mountain*, a 1960 Newbery Honor Book, and *Julie of the Wolves*, which was awarded the John Newbery Medal in 1973. Although most of Jean's books are fiction, they have frequently appeared on lists of the best and most important books in the fields of social studies and science.

Over the years, Jean Craighead George and her family have kept 173 pets, not including dogs and cats, in her home in Chappaqua, New York. George has raised her own children to

love the natural world. Each of them has translated their love of nature in his or her own way. Craig and Luke are environmental scientists, and Twig has become a children's-book writer, too.

Many of the events in Jean's books are based on her personal experiences. She continues to observe the wildlife around her home and incorporates it into her stories. "Most of these wild animals [near her home] depart in autumn when the sun changes their behavior and they feel the urge to migrate or go off alone. While they are with us, however, they become characters in my books, articles, and stories." Whether writing fiction, nonfiction, or picture books, Jean Craighead George has succeeded in bringing the natural world vividly to life for readers of all ages.

How *My Side of the Mountain* Came About



"Jean stared at the moss spores as though studying a painting... trying to memorize every detail so she could draw them later. Then she thought of other things the house needed: tiny acorn cups, for instance, and pine needle brooms."

—*Jean Craighead George* by Alice Cary

On a family outing in the Maryland woods when Jean was a young girl, she came up with an idea. As she wandered along behind her family, Jean found a tree stump with a little opening on one side that she thought looked like a door. Inside, the tree was hollow, and Jean began to envision a house. Only it seemed a bit cold to her, a bit empty. So she grabbed a bit of moss and laid it down inside to make it a little cozier. She was trying to make it a home. Many years later, when Jean wrote *My Side of the Mountain*, her main character created a home for himself in the same way, but on a much larger scale than Jean had attempted as a child.

Another important moment in Jean's childhood influenced her writing. In *My Side of the Mountain*, Sam says to Bando, "Any normal red-blooded American boy wants to live in a tree house and trap his own food. They just don't do it, that's all." For Jean Craighead George, the idea of a young person living independently was irresistible. She wanted to write about a kid who actually did it. In many ways, Jean's own childhood prepared her to write this book. One event in particular helped Jean create Sam Gribble's character. When she was a little girl, she told her mother that she wanted to run away from home. When her mother asked her why, Jean replied, "I'm tired of making my bed. I just mess it up again every night." Satisfied with that answer, Jean's mother encouraged her to go. In fact, she told Jean that she had better go pack a suitcase! And when Jean was finally all ready to go, her mother gave her a kiss good-bye and wished her a good trip.

So Jean left. She walked down the street and waited for a streetcar that she was sure would take her to her grandmother's house in Virginia. Jean never got the chance to ride the trolley from Canada, where Jean's family was living at that time. A neighbor returned Jean to her home and the open arms of her understanding mother. Jean was secretly glad to be back in her very own bed. Later, her mother told her that she had also wanted to run away as a child, and that her mother had even packed her suitcase for her! "I got to the gate of our yard," Jean's mother told her. "You got all the way to the trolley stop."

Throughout her life, and even into adulthood, Jean fantasized about running away and making a home for herself in the woods.

Instead of doing it herself, though, she invented a wonderful character named Sam Gribley. She has said, “I wrote eight books before I saw a way to get Sam out in the wilderness without the park rangers or his family coming to get him. He would tell his dad he was going to go to the family farm in the Catskill Mountains. Then I put myself in Sam’s head and began to write using my own adventures, including eating all those delicious [wild] foods.”

So *My Side of the Mountain* was born. The story, along with its sequels, has enthralled readers ever since.

An Interview with Jean Craighead George



"Great teachers and a few great books make all the difference."

—Jean Craighead George

You have said that you were writing My Side of the Mountain for many years before you ever put pen to paper. When you finally did put it down, what surprised you about the story? Did it take any unexpected turns?

The main problem was how to get him [Sam] into the woods in the twentieth century and not have people running after him. Then I remembered that when my daughter wanted to run away, I packed her bag and sent her down the driveway. Like Mother and me, she came back, of course. But, I thought, this is the way [to make Sam's story work]. So, Sam gets approval and off he goes.

Then another hurdle came. Although I had eaten all the foods Sam eats, trained a falcon, and all of that, I didn't quite know how to end the book. The ending surprised me. I didn't want him to go back to the city, and yet he discovers he's a social animal. And so I had the family come up. But I got an enraged audience. The kids hated that! They thought I should have left him up there! Mainly it was boys who objected.

Do you think it is possible to live like Sam does in the book?

Yes, it is possible. Particularly if you have a falcon. A falcon is the perfect hunter. Plus, when we opened up America, we did that all the time—lived off the land. That's how we crossed the country. We didn't pack canned foods and frozen foods on ice!

Do you think that kids today still seek to conquer the wilderness? What about computers? Would Sam have liked computers? Do you?

Well, there are always the kids who just love animals. Unfortunately, though, people have become afraid of the outdoors. Parents overprotect children now, when the best thing you can do for kids is to get them a toad or a guinea pig, or even a cat. Something to connect them to the natural world. So many parents don't have the background anymore to teach their kids about nature and how to conserve. So we are fast losing a connection. I think that's why *My Side of the Mountain* seems like a myth!

But Sam would love a computer. In fact, if he got his waterwheel going, maybe he could have one right on the mountain! No, he'd probably go down to the library to use it. I love computers. I think it is computers that are going to hold the world together.

You have said that, in 1959, your editor had trouble getting permission to publish My Side of the Mountain. The publisher was afraid of encouraging children to run away even with parental approval. Did you receive criticism for this? How do you respond to it?

In a last-ditch effort to get the book published, the editor said, “Better that he runs to the country than the city, no?” And the publisher finally agreed! But no, I never got criticism. Not until very recently.

Now, I even get [criticism] from the kids. Some say no parent would let their kid do this. And I say, look, this is a novel! Every day I get e-mails from kids who want a tree—a world away from the adult world. The vast majority of kids, boys and girls, really like it.

How do you account for the actions of the adult characters in the book? Why don't they turn Sam in?

There was an attitude at the time [the 1950s] that respected the child. We've lost this. I was respected as a child. If I wanted to go up on the roof and write poetry, that was okay. Maybe they [Jean's parents] thought it was silly, but they said all right, go ahead. Then, I learned it was too cold out there and I came inside!

So the adult characters in the book trust Sam. [The grown-up characters] realized he had an idea and they shouldn't turn him in. But they did keep an eye on him. They saw he was doing fine. Bando comes back—he never said he was there to check on [Sam]. But, of course, that's why he was there.

You have also said that you felt strongly about illustrating your own books, particularly the Sam Gribble books. Why?

Because I lived it. You have to have been there to have it come across not only in the words, but in the drawings. I have seen a falcon fold her wings, dive, and kill dinner. That's why I am able to make kids feel like they've been there. I want to get them on scene. I can do that because I've really been there myself.

When you wrote My Side of the Mountain, did you know it would be the first of a series? Was it satisfying to continue the story—to write about what happened to Sam and his family as they started their new life?

I had an aversion to series, so I had no intention of writing another. I thought one book was enough. But after about twenty years, my editor convinced me that kids wanted more, so I finally wrote the sequel, and then a third one. And the kids were satisfied. In fact, they still want more!

What is your writing process?

I take notes when I camp or hike. Look up things in field guides. Talk to scientists. But I always write the stories at home. Otherwise, I'm too involved in the immediate. If I sit in the woods and start writing, it slows down the process. I come home to write, to keep the story going. I write the stories in my head while I wash dishes and do other chores.

You have said that you use nature guides to inform your writing. But what about fiction? What other kinds of books do you read? What did you read as a child?

I read primarily fiction as a child. I loved Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe. My mother was a reader and read to us. But now, I really thoroughly enjoy reading nature guides and scientific journals. I find them fascinating. I see stories in them.

Did you always know you'd be a writer? What else did you consider as a career?

We were always storytellers in my family. We used to sit around the table telling each other real-life stories. I loved to do this, but I never thought I would be a writer. That's why I became an artist, a dancer, a canoeist, and a swimmer. Then finally a writer.

What can you tell aspiring young writers about life as a writer?

You have to like to be alone. Writing can be lonely, although you do populate your head with all these characters. You have to write every day. I kept diaries—every day. And you have to love it. In life, you just have to look for something you enjoy. It's hard to do a job well if you don't like it a lot.

What do you like most about writing for children?

I like children because they just love nature. It's so much fun to have an audience that's so receptive and fresh. I still remember all my childhood books. I forget the novels I've read as an adult, but I remember those first books. They're very important.