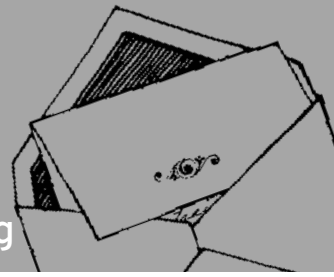


## Patricia MacLachlan on Writing



"I think I am a writer because I wanted to put thoughts on paper and have someone read them. It is that simple."

—Patricia MacLachlan

Patricia MacLachlan says that she can sense when she is entering a writing phase: "I can always tell when I'm about to start writing. I go through cycles in reading. When I'm beginning to start to write something, I start reading what I think of as good literature. I read things with wonderful language." She also listens to what she thinks of as good music when she's preparing to write something new. "Then all of a sudden I wake up in the morning one day and I go to the typewriter and I'm ready to write," MacLachlan says. She credits great children's books, as well as great adult books, as sources of motivation: "My inspiration for writing is all the wonderful books that I read as a child and that I still read. I think that for those of us who write, when we find a wonderful book written by someone else, we don't really get jealous, we get inspired, and that's kind of the mark of what a good writer is."

When asked if she researches the books she writes, she said, “I don’t think I do any formal research. Life is my research.” When she finally is at the point where she is ready to sit down at the typewriter, MacLachlan says, “I always begin with a character. I write a chapter about the character and what he or she is doing, thinking, but I don’t know what the story is about yet.”

MacLachlan also says, “Plot was always my downfall until I learned that basically character and plot amount to the same thing. One grows from the other. As I get to know my characters they let me know what they need. . . . It’s a fluid, organic [natural], and even a little mysterious process.” By letting her characters speak to her, the author lets the story unfold on its own: “I never work from an outline, and often I don’t know how the story will end.”

When she creates her characters and stories, Patricia MacLachlan thinks it is important to show sadness and happiness at the same time. She depicts these emotions within the same character because that is how people are in real life, and life is what inspires her. MacLachlan says, “I think life is a mixture of humor and sadness and poignancy and grief, all these things mixed in together. I think that books in a sense maybe don’t change lives, but they have a great impact on children’s lives. There’s a good deal in this world that is not happy and yet there are moments here or there that I try to illuminate, the kind of thoughtful, pensive moments.”

When asked about the time of day and spaces she finds best for writing, MacLachlan says, “My best time of day as a writer . . . is between five-thirty and eight in the morning, when I make what

at the time seem to me to be the most startling observations. The observations, mind you, that later as I write them become as common as the odd glass of water, the coffee dregs, the garbage of the day—these things, surprise or no surprise, are what life and literature are made of.” She also says that she can pretty much write in any space, even “when everyone is bumping around the house talking or asking me questions because it just seems like a normal kind of thing.” As long as she has a typewriter and a window nearby, she is able to write. MacLachlan writes about the ordinary, but amazing, things she finds in everyday life, so she does not need to escape to create beautiful literature. She can write with her family around her, living life and carrying on as they normally would.

Patricia MacLachlan’s main motivation for writing children’s books is “to show children that I value them and that they are important, and what they say is important, and that they can change lives, and that acts have consequences, and things they do have consequences. So I want them to see themselves as valued in books.”

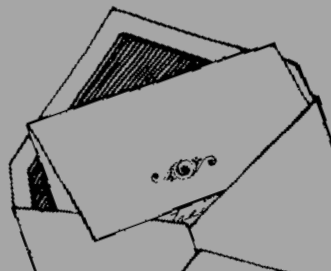
### **For aspiring writers**

Patricia MacLachlan says that the most important thing a person needs in order to be a children’s book writer is a love of children’s books. This may seem obvious, but she has deeper reasons for believing this. MacLachlan says, “Writing for children is special because I think children read with a great true belief in what they’re reading.” MacLachlan also emphasizes that writers should read as much as they can: “One must understand the far reaches

of children's books because they're really about many of the same subjects as adults are concerned with." She has said that truly good books appeal to people of all ages: "Good books have things for children, things for adolescents, and things for adults in them. They're many-leveled, and I like that part of them."

For kids who are aspiring writers, MacLachlan has these wise words to share: "I feel it's crucial that kids who aspire to write understand that I have to rewrite and revise as much as they do. Ours is such a perfectionist society—I see too many kids who believe that if they can't get it right the first time, they aren't writers."

## You Be the Author!



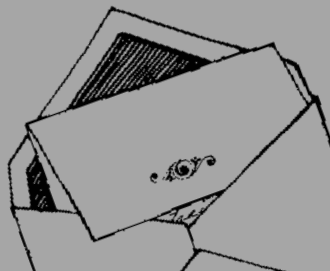
- **Start with a character:** Patricia MacLachlan always starts her book with a character in mind and then develops the story around that character or characters. Think of a person, real or imaginary, and write down important things about him or her, such as, what does this person look like? Where does she live? Where does he or she go? What does he do? Whom does she talk to? What does he see? How does she feel? Create a short story based on your idea of a really interesting character.
- **Put it in a letter:** Just as Sarah exchanged letters with Jacob, Anna, and Caleb, find a pen pal and write to him or her. A pen pal is a buddy with whom you write back and forth, telling them about your life, where you live, your family, whatever is happening to you that you want to share. You can do this over e-mail or the “snail mail” way by sending a letter through the mail like they did in the nineteenth century. 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.
- **Wanted:** Jacob places an advertisement in order to find women who might be interested in being a mother and wife. Write an advertisement for a person or thing you might like to have in your life. It could be a new friend, a parent, or even a new pet.

Make sure to include the important characteristics you would like in that person: This can include anything from being able to dance to being able to fetch a newspaper. It can also include qualities like being kind, smart, or funny.

- **Add a scene:** Think of an event that took place in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* that the author did not tell you much about. Maybe it's what happened when Jacob picked up Sarah at the train station. Or perhaps it is what Sarah did while she was in town by herself. Write the scene to fill in the blank for yourself!

- **A wedding journal:** At the end of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* Anna tells the reader, "Soon there will be a wedding." Who would attend the wedding? What would the ceremony be like? What would they eat? Where would they have the wedding? Pretend that you are Sarah or Jacob keeping a diary of the special event.

## Activities



- **Plant a garden:** Sarah and her family find many different kinds of flowers on the prairie. Make a list of all the prairie flowers mentioned in the book and the ones Sarah says grow in Maine, and do some research about them. Find out what type of soil they thrive in, how much water and light they need, and then plant seeds in a place where they can grow well.
- **Sing!:** Singing is important to Jacob, Anna, and Caleb because it makes them feel happy and reminds them of their wife and mother. Sarah sings with them, and Caleb makes up a song about the woolly ragwort for her. Make up songs of your own about things and people in your life. Think of nice lyrics and a melody. Make your songs funny or silly, happy or sad. Sing about nature, as Caleb does, or sing about things like school, or soccer practice, or your brother's smelly feet!
- **See the sea:** Sarah describes the ocean in detail throughout *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Think about her descriptions of the sea, and create a picture of it in your mind. Then, make a real picture of it! Using colored pencils, crayons, or watercolor paints, draw or paint a seascape. You may have visited the beach yourself, or you may even live near one. Go ahead and include any details you want based on your own experiences with the ocean, too.

- **Pick a bouquet:** Sarah loves all kinds of flowers. She picks wildflowers and even keeps a garden. Spend an hour outside on a nice day picking flowers near your home or school. (Be sure to get permission before picking flowers on property that doesn't belong to you.) Then, hang them upside-down somewhere to dry. Once they've dried completely, you'll be able to enjoy their beauty for a long time.

- **Locate it:** Where in the world is Maine? And where is the prairie? Find a detailed map of the entire United States. Locate these places on the map. How far away from each other are they? How long do you think it would take to travel from one place to the other back in the 1800s? How long do you think it would take now?

- **Take a dip:** Sarah speaks about her love of the ocean, and part of that love was swimming in its salty waves. She teaches the children to swim in the cow pond. Whatever body of water is near you, whether it be an ocean, a lake, or pool, go for a swim. It's fun and great exercise. Never go swimming unattended, though, or in an area with big waves or fast-moving currents. If you don't know how to swim, learn! Ask your parents or older sibling to teach you, if they know how, or take lessons at a local pool or YMCA. You'll be happy you took the plunge!

- **Cover to cover:** The cover of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* shows Sarah sitting with Caleb and Anna on the porch of the house while Sarah cuts Caleb's hair. 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 *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, using images from the book that mean the most to you.

- **See it on the big screen:** There are three movies that were made based on the characters from *Sarah, Plain and Tall*: *Sarah, Plain and Tall*; *Skylark*; and *Winter's End*. Have an adult rent the videos or DVDs, and watch them after you have read the books in the series. Compare and contrast the books with their movie versions. How do they differ? Do you like one version better than the other? Do the actors in the films look like what you imagined the characters in the books to look like? Do the farm and house look like what you imagined?

- **Bake bread:** Just like Sarah, Anna, and Jacob do, you can make a warm, delicious loaf of fresh bread to have at your next meal. Have an adult help you when using the oven.

### **Ingredients**

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup rolled (old-fashioned) oats

$1\frac{1}{4}$  cup warm water

4 tablespoons oil or melted butter

4 tablespoons honey

2 cups whole wheat flour (white flour was available but costly at the time) + 2–4 extra cups as needed

2 teaspoons baking powder

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon baking soda

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt

## **Directions**

1. Combine oats, water, oil or butter, and honey in a small bowl. Let the mixture sit for about five minutes so the oats soften.
2. In a separate, large bowl, combine 2 cups of the flour with the baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Stir until the ingredients are combined.
3. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and combine.
4. Add more flour, 1 cup at a time, and mix until the ingredients come together and start pulling away from the sides of the bowl. The dough will feel thick, elastic, and a little sticky.
5. Put  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of flour on your work surface. Knead the dough by pressing and turning it over and over 20–30 times.
6. Spread a small amount of oil on the inside of a clean bowl. Place the kneaded dough into the bowl and let it sit for 30 minutes.
7. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
8. Form dough into a round loaf and bake on a greased cookie sheet for 45 minutes, or until a toothpick poked in the center comes out dry.
9. Eat warm with butter or honey.

• **She sells seashells:** Sarah fondly remembers the seashells in Maine. The next time you are at the ocean, go shell hunting! Collect different types of shells in a bucket. Rinse the sand off

them, and try to identify what type of shells they are. A field guidebook such as *National Audubon Society First Field Guide: Shells* will help you do this. Use the shells to decorate your bedroom, or save them in a special place to remind you of the beach.