

About Natalie Babbitt



"There's always one best word, if you listen for it."

—Natalie Babbitt

Natalie Babbitt is an artist in more ways than one. Known by many people for her descriptive, metaphorical writing, she is less well known for her beautiful illustrations. However, it was this passion that involved her in children's books in the first place.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, on July 28, 1932, Natalie Zane Moore [Babbitt] came into the world at the height of the Great Depression. Thanks to her parents, though, she and her sister enjoyed a life filled with good times, books, and loads of loving encouragement. Natalie loved drawing from an early age. Though she read books constantly, she had very little interest in writing them. She wanted only to illustrate, to bring words to life. She dreamed of capturing imaginations the very same way her imagination had been taken captive by the illustrations in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, one of her favorite books. With her mother's support, Natalie was able to develop her passion and her talent. She also had a great deal of support from her teachers

at Laurel School in Cleveland. After high school, she went on to study art at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Love interrupted her art career and Natalie married Samuel Fisher Babbitt, an academic administrator, right after her college graduation. They spent the next ten years in Connecticut, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C., where Babbitt raised their children, Christopher, Tom, and Lucy.

Eventually, Babbitt got back to drawing when she illustrated a book written by her husband, called *The Forty-Ninth Magician*. They thought it was the beginning of an ideal collaboration. However, after moving to Clinton, New York, her husband's career responsibilities left him with little time to dedicate to his writing. So Natalie Babbitt decided that if she wanted to create books for children, she would simply have to write *and* illustrate them herself. Her first two picture books, *Dick Foote and the Shark* and *Phoebe's Revolt*, were written in easy rhyme, a style Natalie thought suited her better than prose.

Babbitt's faith in herself as an artist and a writer turned out to be momentous for her and for readers everywhere. Though she started by writing and illustrating picture books for younger children, soon one of her ideas developed into the novel that would eventually make her one of the preeminent children's novelists of our time. In that novel, *The Search for Delicious*, Babbitt incorporated her love of fairy tales. The book was greeted by children's book reviewers as the first major work of an exciting new talent.

Natalie Babbitt's subsequent books have consistently achieved a place on the major lists of outstanding children's literature in the years of their publication. *The Devil's Storybook* was nominated for a National Book Award in 1975, named an American Library Association (ALA) Notable Book, and received the Christopher and Lewis Carroll Shelf awards. *Kneeknock Rise* was a Newbery Honor Book in 1971; *Goody Hall* was chosen as an Honor Book in the 1971 Book World Children's Spring Book Festival; and two of Babbitt's books have been selected for inclusion in the Children's Book Council's Children's Book Showcase: *Goody Hall* in 1972 and *More Small Poems*, illustrated by Babbitt and written by poet Valerie Worth, in 1977. In 1981, Babbitt was the U.S. nominee for the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, an award presented by the International Board on Books for Young People in recognition of someone "whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature." (This award is "the highest international recognition given to an author and an illustrator of children's books.") All of these books, including *The Eyes of the Amaryllis*, were also ALA Notable Children's Books.

Natalie Babbitt is perhaps best known for her magical book, *Tuck Everlasting*. Babbitt has brought books to life for children just as she had always hoped she would. She has created worlds that mesh fantasy and reality. She allows readers to go to places that might not be real exactly, but are certainly true to life.

How *Tuck Everlasting* Came About



“Winnie blinked, and all at once her mind was drowned with understanding of what he was saying. For she—yes, even she—would go out of the world willy-nilly someday. Just go out, like the flame of a candle, and no use protesting. It was a certainty.”

—*Tuck Everlasting*

There comes a moment in all young people’s lives when they realize that they are not going to live forever. Whether the thought is prompted by the death of a beloved pet or of a relative or friend, the realization changes the person. This is why Natalie Babbitt felt compelled to write about death—or in this case, life without death and its implications.

Babbitt says, “I think it’s something that everyone thinks of from the time when they realize they can’t [live forever]. Even before you’re six because you have a pet or a grandmother [whom you’ve lost] and you begin to wonder about it. So I thought it would be interesting to write a book about real people, ordinary people—not like the people in fairy tales who are always living

happily ever after. But, what would [living forever] really be like in the real world.”

In *Tuck Everlasting*, Babbitt created Winnie, a character who feels that her life is meaningless and boring. The prospect of living forever is exciting to her. In the course of the novel, as she gets to know the Tucks, Winnie listens to different opinions about eternal life: Jesse is hopeful, Miles is realistic, Mae is determined, and Angus is depressed. Winnie comes to understand that eternal life might be a curse and not a blessing.

This novel is Babbitt’s way of introducing the life cycle and explaining the beauty of living in the moment. Babbitt seems to say that life is short and your time on earth ought to be meaningful in some way.

Babbitt says, “[*Tuck Everlasting*] presents dilemmas, and I think that’s what life does! I dealt with a lot of dilemmas before I even started school. I think a lot of adults would like to think that things are simple for kids, but that’s not so. . . . I think the book doesn’t present any lessons about what’s right and what’s wrong, but it does point out how difficult these decisions are.”



About *Tuck Everlasting*

You have said that you are always surprised when people find this story unusual. You think eternal life is quite an ordinary dilemma to think about. Why then do you think the issue is so compelling to both children and adults?

It's very interesting when I go to schools and talk to students. They are so direct and they usually say, well yes it would be neat [to live forever] but I wouldn't want to do that because x, y, and z. All the same reasons I would give. And once in a while I get a child who is very upset by the ending and we talk about that, too. There is no right or wrong way to look at it. I tell them that at different times in your life you feel differently about it.

You have noted that some readers have not been satisfied with the ending. Why do you think some readers aren't satisfied with Winnie's choice?

It is mainly girls who feel that way. They have been quite charmed by Jesse and they think she should marry him. I always have a good laugh about that because he is charming but I think he'd make a terrible husband!

But most of them do change their minds about it later on. In fact, a young girl wrote to tell me that she was so very disappointed with the ending and I wrote back to her to say that that was okay—there is no right or wrong way to feel. Seven years later, the same girl wrote to me and said that she had changed her mind, and that she realized the book had ended the way it was supposed to. I always tell kids about that because that's beautiful.

You have said that Tuck Everlasting doesn't exactly teach a lesson; rather, that it presents dilemmas. Does that mean that you think there is no right or wrong answer to the biggest dilemma of the book? Doesn't Tuck Everlasting disapprove of someone choosing eternal life over natural death?

Winnie does what I would have done. There are plenty of people who wouldn't have done it, though. Particularly if there was someone to share eternity with. I think it would be very boring, and even with the right person I think it would be lonely. The fact that we don't have a lot of time puts a lot of delicious pressure on us to do things. But there's no law that says that's the way you have to feel about it.

The book has an anyplace, anytime feel to it. Do you think the setting is important to the story?

Although I am from Ohio, *Tuck Everlasting* is based mainly on upstate New York. I can remember learning that there was a forest that went on through about five different states. I always

thought that was pretty interesting and that's what Winnie's grandmother says. So I had that in mind, also. But Tuck's house and pond are based on a real place that we owned years ago. It doesn't really matter, though. The book could be set anywhere that isn't desert or mountain. The wood is the important part.

Some people have said that you essentially “turn religion on its head” in this novel. Did religion come into play for you? Are you surprised that some people read it that way?

I thought [that interpretation] was extremely interesting because I had never thought about that. Formal religion has always been a difficulty for me in terms of figuring it out. I like things to be spelled out. I read a lot of Greek and Roman myths as a child—that was my favorite kind of reading in addition to fairy tales—and I always felt that the logic in those stories was much more obvious than the logic in the Bible because you didn't have to be perfect. I had a lot of trouble with that as a child. I couldn't be perfect. So, I don't know how much of a role that played in the book. But it might well be in there. I don't object to that.

Tuck Everlasting is a different type of fantasy than [the type] kids these days are accustomed to. In fact, it is the simple fact that living forever is an option that places this book in the fantasy genre.

Does the imagery you use in your writing come from being an artist? For example, in Tuck Everlasting you describe August as

having “blank white dawns and glaring noons, and sunsets smeared with too much color.”

I guess there is a picturesque quality that comes into play and that probably does come from the same place. My mother was a painter and she trained my sister and me to look at things early on. It probably comes from that, too. I am a relatively passive person, so I love to look at things. That part is fun.

You have said that you use metaphors and similes because they help readers understand things that they otherwise might not. But what about personification? It seems to come into play a lot in this book. For example, grass is “forlorn,” the house is “proud of itself,” and the cows are “wise.” Where does that come from for you?

We were a word-loving family. It probably comes from my father more than anywhere else. He did very funny things with language in that way.

About being a writer

Will you describe your writing process?

I have to get everything all figured out in my head before I start. How [the story] will begin and end, who the characters are, what their names are, where it will happen—all the details of that kind. I write straight through then, although it takes me quite a long time because I rewrite as I go along. There aren't any rules about how to do it.

You have been criticized for being too descriptive. How do you feel about that?

Well, perhaps some of the books are wordier than they need to be. That's hard for some people.

Do you write every day?

No. I used to. Although, I never was a fast writer. It takes me a year to write a novel and that's not counting the time it takes me to plan it out.

What happens when you get blocked?

I've never been in much of a hurry. The writer's block comes for me when I can't work out a plot. The rest of it, the writing, I really enjoy and I find that relatively easy. We all use words all the time, so it's a universal thing for us. But I get hung up on plots—plotting is hard for me.

What are you working on now?

I've got about two more ideas and that will be it.

How did you become a writer?

I originally wanted to be an illustrator, so my husband wrote the first book. But he didn't want to do that anymore because he was

busy. He is more of a people person and he just couldn't be alone as much as you have to. No one ever said to me in a writing class that being alone is a part of it [being a writer], but it certainly is. You have to like to be by yourself.

So, I figured I could write books in verse because I had always written a lot of verse—not poetry but verse [verse is a form of writing in which words are arranged in a rhythmic pattern but is less structured than traditional poetry]. So, the first two books I did were in verse. I had a lot of fun with those but then my editor said that I would have a lot more freedom if I were writing in prose, so I sat down to write a little picture-book story and it just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and became *The Search for Delicious*.

It might sound silly but I [wrote a novel] before I knew how hard it was to do. After that, it became more difficult and it continues to become more difficult because you're more conscious of what you're doing and that makes it hard. Writing is extremely hard work.

Does the acclaim that you've received put pressure on you when you sit down to write a new book?

Ambition is a strange thing. I never had very much. I just wanted to do one book. But there are a lot of things I like to do. I like to make things, knit, and play the piano. So, I wasn't particularly single-minded about it.

What happened to the idea of being an artist?

I wanted to be an artist, but it seemed clear to me early on that I was adequate, but that was all I was ever going to be. We have a lot of marvelous illustrators, [Maurice] Sendak being my favorite. I actually think we have more fine illustrators than we have fine writers.

Did you always know that you wanted to do books for children?

Oh yes, and that's because of *Alice in Wonderland*. John Tenniel's illustrations in the original *Alice in Wonderland* just knocked my socks off! Those pictures are very beautiful and very funny and that's such a wonderful combination. You see that a lot now, but when I was a child, they were either cartoons or incredible paintings.

When did you start to think about what you would be when you grew up?

I wanted to be a librarian when I was in second grade, and then in fourth grade I decided I wanted to be an illustrator. I have a huge respect for librarians and teachers. It is some of the most important work anybody can do. My daughter is a teacher for second grade and she published three novels for teenagers—she's a great writer. I don't think I could have [taught] because I don't think I'm a "people" kind of person. I prefer to work alone. But thank God there are people who prefer to do that kind of work. We owe them so much.