

## About Phyllis Reynolds Naylor



*"I'm not happy unless I spend some time,  
every day, writing."*

—Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

**P**hyllis Reynolds Naylor loves to write. And she writes a lot. She has written more than one hundred books and more than two thousand short stories and articles. She writes for children, teenagers, and adults. How can anyone write so much? Was she born writing? Well, just about.

Phyllis Dean Reynolds was born on January 4, 1933, in Anderson, Indiana. She was the second of three children, with an older sister and a younger brother. Her mother was a homemaker, and her father was a salesman. It was the Great Depression, and the family moved around a lot in search of hard-to-find jobs for Mr. Reynolds.

While the family's hometown changed often, their nighttime ritual did not. Eugene or Lura Mae Reynolds read to their three children every night. This planted the seed for their middle child to become a writer. "I loved stories as far back as I can remember," Naylor says, "because my parents read aloud to us every night."

Naylor began writing her very own books in fourth grade. She remembers: “Each day I would rush home from school to see if the wastebasket held any discarded paper that had one side blank. We were not allowed to use new sheets of paper for our writing and drawing, so books had to be done on used paper. I would staple these sheets together and sometimes paste a strip of colored paper over the staples to give it the appearance of a bound book. Then I would grandly begin my story, writing the words at the top of each page and drawing an accompanying picture on the bottom. And sometimes I even cut old envelopes in half and pasted them on the inside covers as pockets, slipping an index card in each one, like a library book, so I could check it out to friends and neighbors. I was the author, illustrator, printer, binder, and librarian, all in one.”

Naylor wrote hundreds of these books. The young author’s creativity wasn’t limited to books, however. “I always loved to make things,” she says. “If I wasn’t writing I would be making pot holders or building things out of wood. I loved to have a finished product in my hand.”

When Naylor was sixteen, her first story was published in a church magazine. As much as she loved to write, however, she didn’t begin her career as a writer right away. “I did not know that writing would be my life’s work until I was in my late twenties,” she says. She had been writing all that time, and submitting stories to small magazines, but writing wasn’t her full-time job. She worked as a teacher, a locker-room attendant, a secretary, and an editorial assistant before she dedicated herself completely to writing.

Naylor began her writing career in 1960. Five years later, her first book—the short story collection *The Galloping Goat and Other Stories*—was published. Her first novel, *What the Gulls Were Singing*, was published two years later. Naylor has published at least one book a year ever since.

The author credits her success to her persistence. “If I hadn’t stuck with it, if I hadn’t tried to make my next story better than the one before, I probably wouldn’t ever have gotten up the courage to write books,” she says. Where did she learn never to give up? From her father. Naylor says that her father always believed that “you could accomplish anything you wanted if you really tried.” His daughter proved him right.

With so many books to her credit, it’s clear Naylor devotes a lot of time to her craft. “Even when I’m not writing, I’m thinking about what I’m working on or what I want to try next,” Naylor says. But the author doesn’t spend all her time writing. “I also take time to swim and hike and snorkel and eat Chinese food and chocolate and go to the theater and play the piano and visit schools and talk about my books,” she says.

Naylor also enjoys a happy home life. She and Rex Naylor, a speech pathologist, have been married for more than forty years. The Naylor family lives in Bethesda, Maryland, and has two grown sons.



## How *Shiloh* Came About

"You get a dog on your mind, it seems to fill up the whole space. Everything you do reminds you of that dog."

—Marty, *Shiloh*

**W**hat do you do if you find a stray dog that tears at your heart? If you're Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, you write about it.

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor met the dog that was to become *Shiloh* in much the same way that Marty does in Naylor's award-winning book.

"My husband and I were visiting friends in West Virginia," Naylor recalls, "and rose one morning for a long walk in the little community known as *Shiloh*." After passing the old gristmill, crossing the bridge, and walking just past the schoolhouse, they found a "hungry, trembling—and strangely silent—dog." The dog was too frightened to approach them until Naylor whistled. "When I whistled, it . . . came bounding over, leaping up to lick my cheek," Naylor says. "It followed us back to the house of our friends, and sat out all day in the rain, head on its paws, watching the door."

It was “the saddest dog I’d ever seen,” Naylor says. And all that day she couldn’t get the dog that was in the yard, in the rain, off her mind. She talked about it with her husband. She talked about it with their friends, Frank and Trudy Madden. They told her that the dog outside was just one of many that owners regularly abandoned in the West Virginia hills where they lived. Their words didn’t make her feel any better.

Naylor left West Virginia that night with a heavy heart. “I agonized all the way back to Maryland that evening,” she remembers. Her husband finally said to her, “Are you going to have a nervous breakdown or are you going to do something about it?” Naylor decided to do what she almost always did when faced with a difficult problem: write about it.

“I got hooked on that dog.” Naylor remembers. “As Marty would say, [I was] whistling as though I meant something, then offering nothing. I felt I owed it more.”

Naylor says she wrote the first draft of *Shiloh* at breakneck speed. “It was as though I was obsessed with getting to the end of the story and finding out just what happened between Marty and Judd Travers.” The ending was difficult, though, because Naylor kept finding ways Judd might try to trick Marty. “I had to discover, like him, that nothing is as simple as you guess—not right or wrong, not Judd Travers, not even Marty himself or the dog,” says Naylor. (The author eventually wrote two more *Shiloh* books, *Shiloh Season* and *Saving Shiloh*, in which she worked out some of her worries about Judd tricking Marty.)

The ending may not have been simple, but it was happy. Marty did get Shiloh. There was another happy ending, too. Just a few weeks after Naylor started writing *Shiloh*, she got a letter from her friends the Maddens. They had taken the abandoned dog into their home and named it Clover. Naylor remembered the kindness of her friends as well as the book's beginnings when she dedicated her book, "To Frank and Trudy Madden and a dog named Clover."

## An Interview with Phyllis Reynolds Naylor



### **About *Shiloh***

*You've said that you keep a notebook full of reference material for whatever book you're working on. Did you keep such a notebook for *Shiloh*? If so, what are some of the things it contained?*

No, not for *Shiloh*. Usually I think about a book months, even years, before I ever put a word down on paper. But it wasn't until I came across that sad, mistreated dog on a visit to West Virginia that the idea for a book took hold and wouldn't let go. I pushed all my other projects aside and started out cold, with not a note to my name. With the two sequels, however, my notebook included maps of the area, photos of Middle Island Creek, the old schoolhouse, and so on. I had to find out about West Virginia's hunting season, where the nearest jail was located, what the fine for hunting out of season would be, and all sorts of things that would help make the books authentic.

*What prompted you to write sequels to *Shiloh*?*

First, I received interesting questions from readers. "How did Marty pay Doc Murphy for taking care of *Shiloh* after he was hurt?" And "Marty rescued one of Judd's dogs, but what

happened to the rest?” However, what really made me want to write the sequels, after I had said there would never be a sequel to *Shiloh*, was that I received so many letters full of rage against Judd Travers. “Have Marty’s father take a gun and shoot him through the eye,” readers would write, “. . . through the brain, the heart, the ear. . . .” “Have Judd Travers go over the edge of a cliff and burn up,” others wrote. I felt I could not leave readers with all that hate without giving them some understanding of how Judd got to be the way he was. And once we understand why people do what they do, it is easier to hope for redemption than to pray for revenge.

*In your acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal [the medal awarded by the American Library Association for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children], you said, “I had to discover, like [Marty], that nothing is as simple as you guess,” which is what Marty says in the last paragraph of the book. Is this the main theme of the book?*

Yes, I think so. It is discovering that there is sometimes a very thin line between “right” and “wrong”—a vast gray area where rules and laws and moral concepts don’t always tell you what you should do. There are times when you must simply think out a situation for yourself, and that’s what Marty tries to do. One of the biggest rewards for me, in writing the *Shiloh* books, has been the number of librarians and teachers who tell me that these books provided some of the most stimulating conversations they have ever had in their classrooms. And the number of parents who had used the book as a read-aloud to their children, and

had interesting family discussions as to what each member would do if confronted with Marty's dilemma.

*What would you do if you were in Marty Preston's shoes and an abused dog ran away to you?*

That's exactly the question I asked myself when I found that dog, and the quest that prompted the book: What *would* I have done, especially if I were only eleven years old, in a small community where there was a strong tradition of individual rights, animal ownership, and minding your own business? And so I wrote the book to see how I would have handled it, were I in Marty's shoes.

### **About being a writer**

*You have said that on your deathbed you're sure you will gasp, "But I still have five more books to write!" Where do you get all of your ideas? How do you manage such a busy mind?*

It's hard, and almost makes me crazy. There are currently eight three-ring notebooks beside my writing chair, each with a title on masking tape stuck to the spine, waiting its turn. The notebooks were my husband's idea. I was going nuts trying to keep all this stuff in my head, afraid something would slip out and float away. Now, when I get another thought about a book-to-be, I simply open the notebook, jot it down, and can go back to the book I'm currently writing. I don't know where the ideas come from. They just do.

The more you write, the more possibilities you see for stories in things that happen to you, that people tell you, that you read about in the paper, or just imagine. In one way, all of these ideas are a blessing. I never have to go searching for something to write about. In another way, they're a curse, because the book you are *not* writing at the moment always seems better than the one that you are writing, and there's always that temptation to push one aside and start another.

*How did it feel to win the Newbery Medal?*

What I remember most vividly was holding my stomach and bending over. Shock. I didn't even know it was being considered. In the middle of eating my shredded wheat, I was going over my writing tasks for the day, never dreaming that I would soon be on my way to New York for the *Today* show the following morning. It was certainly one of the most memorable times of my life, next to marrying my husband and giving birth to our sons. I wish that every author could experience the joy and wonder of the Newbery.

*When do you write? Will you describe a typical day for us?*

I'm not happy unless I can spend a part of every day writing. It's sort of like steam building up inside my head, and writing helps release that. A usual day for me begins about 5:30 A.M., when I drive to an aquatics center near our house and do water-jogging for an hour. Or, if it's summer, I swim in our pool. After that, there's breakfast, a glance at the headlines, and then I begin,

usually in my comfortable writing chair in the living room or a rocking chair on the screened porch. I often get in four to six hours, but the rest of the day is devoted to the business of writing—reading over contracts, answering questionnaires like this one, answering mail, looking over photo shoots for another dust jacket. I may take a walk at the end of the day or another swim, get dinner, write a little more if the writing is going well, watch *ER* or *West Wing* on TV, or go out to dinner and the theater with my husband.

*How important is reading to your writing?*

It's not only interesting but professionally necessary to see how other writers deal with themes, or what voice works for a given novel. I have a much better ear than an eye, however. Perhaps because our parents read aloud to us until we were well into our teens, my ear seems able to pick up much more than my eye. I'm a very slow reader. And so I spend a considerable amount of money renting Books on Tape. The moment I get in my car, I "turn on" a novel. This is why it's easy for me to get up at 5:30 each morning. I can't wait to get in the car and "see what happens next."

*What is your favorite thing about being a writer? What is your least favorite?*

The absolutely most favorite thing is the moment a character comes alive for me on paper, or where a place I am writing about suddenly seems real. There are no bands playing, no audience

applauding. It's a very solitary moment, but something akin to giving birth. "I've got it!" I say to myself, and from then on, the writing's a joy.

The least favorite is galley proofs. I'm actually not a very precise person. I would make a terrible accountant or rocket scientist or brain surgeon. And to have to go over every single word, every single punctuation mark . . . It's murder.

*What do you find easiest when writing? What do you find hardest?*

Dialogue is the most fun for me, the easiest, and probably the most successful. Description is the hardest. I have to force myself to stop and describe something. I'm always afraid it's going to slow down the action, yet I love to read description in books by other authors. This probably has something to do with my ear being stronger than my eye.

*What advice do you have for children who would like to be writers?*

When I speak in schools, I often give a writing workshop over a brown bag lunch to a dozen or so would-be writers. The question I am most often asked is, "I love to write, but I have a hard time thinking of something to write about. How do I get an idea?" And my answer is to think about the time in their lives when they were most sad, embarrassed, scared, or angry. Write down just a sentence or two about each of those episodes. Then, choose one, and turn it over to their imaginations. Give it wings. Make the beginning different. Change the ending. Have

it happen to someone else. That way they are starting with something real that affected them deeply, and turning it into fiction.

## **General**

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

It would have to be something I could hold in my hands. I like to make things, to have a finished product when I'm through. Perhaps I would be a baker and make bread. Or a weaver or a potter. I studied with the intent of becoming a psychologist and working with young children. And sometimes I wish I could have done that, too. But I think I made the right choice. Truly, I can't think of anything I would enjoy as much.

*What's one thing, besides writing, that you're really good at?*

*What's one thing that you're really bad at?*

I'm a good baker. I'm known for my poppyseed bread and Christmas cookies. At the opposite end of the scale, I'm also known for being the sloppiest bookkeeper. I have caused more messes in our checkbook than I would like to admit. But time will always be more important to me than money, and I can use every spare minute that I get.