<u>Cynthia Rylant</u>
In Their Own Country transcript

1 **Kate Long:** You have such a way of communicating directly to people. Your writing just sounds like you're talking. Do you think about that?

Cynthia Rylant: Well, yes, I guess I do. You know, I always just settle in, deep and quiet, when I write and just respect the heart, you know? (laughing)

Kate: You're hearing the voice of Cynthia Rylant, who grew up in Beaver, Raleigh County, West Virginia, and became one of the best-loved children's book writers in the world**.**

Cynthia: I guess it is kind of a secret unraveling that comes out when you write.

2 **Cynthia:** If you're a serious writer, a serious artist, you write about those things that you're deeply moved by. And I think most people are deeply moved by the same things that I'm moved by. I just happen to be the one who was given the ability to put that swelling of the heart, that sweet reverence that you have for those things around you and those people that you live with into some kind of language. That seems to be my particular gift in this world.

Kate: I'm Kate Long, the person who was lucky enough to interview this woman. This is In Their Own Country, a special series that brings you the work and thoughts of some of West Virginia's best-loved writers.

3 **Kate:** No West Virginia writer is more loved than Cynthia Rylant. A lot of her fans are under three feet tall, but grownups, don't tune out. This woman will also stir you up and enchant you, make you think. Toward the end of the program, we'll have some of what she calls "my writing for grown people."

Cynthia Rylant has written over a hundred books and won many awards including the Newbury Award, the Oscar of children's books. I looked her up on an internet search engine and found over 900 sites featuring a discussion of her work, some created by people under ten.

As the Kirkus Review said, Cynthia Rylant's "Accessible, beautifully-written stories are wise, witty, and full of compassionate insight - a joy to read." For this program, we've paired her beautiful writing with the beautiful guitar playing of West Virginia musician Robin Kessinger.

4 **Cynthia**: This is my picture book, *"The Relatives Came."* This is a true story from my childhood.

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It was in the summer of the year when the relatives came. They came up from Virginia. They left when their grapes were nearly purple enough to pick, but not quite. They had an old station

wagon that smelled like a real car. And in it, they put an ice chest full of soda pop and some boxes of crackers and some baloney sandwiches, and up they came from Virginia. They left at four in the morning when it was still dark, before even the birds were awake.

They drove all day long and into the night. And while they traveled along, they looked at the strange houses and the different mountains, and they thought about their almost-purple grapes back home. They thought about Virginia. But they thought about us too, waiting for them. So they drank up all their pop and ate up all their crackers and traveled up all those miles until finally, they pulled into our yard.

Then it was hugging time. Talk about hugging! Those relatives just passed us all around their car, pulling us against their wrinkled Virginia clothes, crying sometimes. They hugged us for hours! Then it was into the house, and so much laughing and shining faces and hugging in the doorways. You'd have to go through four different hugs to get from the kitchen to the front room! Those relatives!

And finally, after a big supper, two or three times around, until we all got a turn at the table, there was quiet talk, and we were in twos and threes through the house.

The relatives weren't particular about beds, which was good, since there weren't any extras. So a few squeezed in with us, and the rest slept on the floor, some with their arm thrown over the closest person, some with their arms thrown across one person and a leg across another. It was different, going to sleep with all that new breathing in the house.

The relatives stayed for weeks and weeks. They helped us tend the garden, and they fixed any broken things they could find. They ate up all our strawberries and melons, then promised we could eat up all their grapes and peaches when we came to Virginia. But none of us thought about Virginia much. We were so busy hugging and eating and breathing together.

Finally, after a long time, the relatives loaded up their ice chest and headed back to Virginia at four in the morning. We stood there in our pajamas and waved them off in the dark. We watched the relatives disappear down the road, then we crawled back into our beds that felt too big and too quiet. We fell asleep. And the relatives drove on all day long and into the night. And while they traveled on, they looked at the strange houses and different mountains, and they thought about their dark, purple grapes waiting at home in Virginia. But they thought about us too, missing them, and they missed us.

And when they were finally home in Virginia, they crawled into their silent, soft beds and dreamed about the next summer.
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5 Kate: I think you had some good storytellers to listen to, good models that sunk into your brain.

Cynthia: That's probably true. And they weren't really long-winded storytellers. They knew how to tell it in just enough words that they got you, they grabbed you, they made you laugh, and they let you go. (laughing)

Kate: West Virginia is good for that. (laughing)

Cynthia: Yeah, we get to the point real fast! (laughing)

6 **Kate**: You write about ordinary things.

Cynthia: Well, you know, when you live a sheltered childhood (laughing), you don't have a whole lot of adventures out in the world to write about. You really do have to concentrate on making beautiful what it is that you have. And so, I grew up in a very small community in southern, rural West Virginia. For the first several years of my life, I was out in the country. Nobody had a car. The men went off the mines. They took the vehicles. So we were left to entertain ourselves.

Later, when I moved to a town that had little sidewalks and a drug store and hardware, my mother was a working parent and she was gone all day. And this was true even in the summertime. She was gone all day, and I was an only child, and I was left to my own resources. So, basically, I just kind of walked the roads and got to know people and developed into the person that I am now.

7 **Cynthia:** This poem from *Waiting to Waltz* is called "*Sam the Shoe Shop Man."*

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you hear someone open and close a creaking screen door. You wonder who is up so late. And, if you lie very still, you may hear an apple fall from the tree in the back yard. Listen! Plump!

Later, the rabbits will patter into your back yard and eat pieces of your fallen apples. But only when they think you are asleep. And all around you, on a night in the country, are the groans and thumps and squeaks that houses make when they are trying, like you, to sleep. Outside, a raccoon mother licks her babies. A cow nuzzles her calf. An old pig rolls over in the barn. And toward morning, one small bird will be the first to tell everyone that night in the country is nearly over. The owls will go to sleep. The frogs will grow quiet. The rabbits will run away. Then they will spend a day in the country, listening to you.
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11 So, this poem is called "Catholics."

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Kate: Sounds wonderful. Lucky you!

Cynthia: Their language was natural. They didn't feel they had to impress anybody. They didn't have to sound smart. They didn't have to sound philosophical. They were just laughing and being themselves, and I think that kind of honesty helped me, as a writer, try not to (laughs) "Don't be so uppity," my grandmother would say. So, all that family influence, I'm sure, had a great deal to do with the kind of writer I turned out to be.

Kate: So they didn't chase the kids out or make them be quiet.

Cynthia: (laughing) No. The kids were never sent to another room, and they were never looked at as things to be avoided or tolerated. They were just a natural part of the family. And so the kids weren't separated from what was going on, and all the talk, and even all the problems. I think that was a real blessing.

15 This is chapter one of my novel, *Missing May*.

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and they knew an angel when they saw her, and they took me on home. Home was, still is, a rusty old trailer stuck on the face of a mountain in Deep Water, in the heart of Fayette County. It looked to me, the first time, like a toy that God had been playing with and accidentally dropped out of heaven. Down and down and down it came and landed – thunk! – on this mountain, sort of cockeyed and shaky and grateful to be in one piece. Well, sort of in one piece. Not counting that part in the back where the aluminum's peeling off, or the one missing window, or the front steps that are sinking.

That first night in it with Ob and May was as close to paradise as I may ever come in my life. Paradise because these two old people - who never dreamed they'd be bringing a little girl back from their visit with the relatives in Ohio - started, from the first minute we pulled up in Ob's old Valient, to turn their rusty, falling-down place into a house just meant for a child. May started talking about where they'd hang the swing as soon as she hoisted herself out of the front seat - May was a big woman - and Ob was designing a tree house in his head before he even got the car shut off.
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Cynthia: Yes, it was. That was the first children's picture book I wrote that I knew was perfect. I had tried to write a few other picture books before then, and they weren't very good. But the day that I wrote that book, I knew that I had made something really beautiful.

18 *When I Was Young in the Mountains*

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19 **Cynthia**: I sent it off to four different publishing houses hoping that in the thousands of unsolicited manuscripts that they received every month (laughs), somehow my letter and my story would filter up to the top of the pile and an editor would read it. And that's exactly what happened. So I got a letter, I dunno, about four months later after I'd sent out the book from a New York publisher saying that they loved the work and that they wanted to make it into a book. And that was my beginning in children's books.

Kate: I can just imagine you opening that letter.

Cynthia: Yeah, I was living on a street in Huntington. My baby was taking a nap. And I opened the letter and read it, and I ran outside, and the postman was about four houses down, and I yelled at him and told him (laughs) what he had just delivered to me. So he was the first person to congratulate me. I still remember what he looked like and everything!

music

20 **Cynthia**: Most writers I've heard speak about themselves and their work usually say that they write every day. I go months without writing putting a word down on a piece of paper. I wait. I just wait and wait and wait for that feeling inside me. It's hard to explain the feeling. But this day just comes along, and suddenly I just, I feel like it's the day (laughs). It's very hard to explain. I get sort of restless inside. I almost feel the tips of my fingers tingling, and I pick up my yellow notebook and my pen, and I'll just go find a comfortable place to sit and wait and see what it is that I'm supposed to be putting on the paper.

If it's nice weather, I always sit outside. I don't write a whole lot in the winter, I think because I get a little blue in the winter, like most people, so I'm not at my best creatively. But I do love springtime and summertime for writing a lot. So I'll just go outside with my yellow notebook and my dogs, and we'll sit outside in the back yard or something, and I'll wait. And pretty soon, then I'm writing.

It's impossible to explain how I thought of the idea, why I thought about writing about a scarecrow that particular day, or why I thought of writing a book of poems about my childhood in Beaver, West Virginia that particular day. That's always just the mystery of it.

But anyway, I'll write it fairly quickly – usually in one sitting. Certainly, the picture books I'll write in one sitting, and the poetry books usually in a day. If it's a novel, I will usually spend about a month on it. I won't write every day. I won't force that out. But I will sit down every two or three days and see if I can get another chapter out. Once it's finished, I type it up, and I mail it off, and my work is done. And I turn back to my life. Before, the focus of my life and what gave it the best meaning for me was raising my son. Then he grew up! (laughs) He's in college now, and I still don't know how to replace that job that I had. So even when you're a successful author, it doesn't mean that that takes care of all your needs.

21 **Cynthia**: This is a picture book I wrote, titled *Scarecrow.*

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that. It crossed my mind. I went out and I bought some paints and some paper. I holed up in a bedroom in the house and, for the next few weeks, I painted my heart out, just as if I were a six-year-old with a paintbrush in first grade. "OK, do the dog, do the angels, do the stars. They don't have to look like anybody else's dogs, angels, or stars." It was … I couldn't wait to get out of bed every morning and go back to painting that book. It was really great. It gave me a lot.

23 **Kate**: You're very interested in religion.

Cynthia: Oh yes.

Kate: Not in a proselytizing way, but in a questioning way, kids trying to deal with religion.

Cynthia: Well, I really can't imagine writing much in my life without God making an appearance often. Whatever you think God is, and obviously, my image will be different than somebody else's, The Creator, for me, is an essential part of what's going on. So yes, religion and the use of the word God appears over and over in my books. And it's certainly not a conscious effort to promote religion, I just have this deep love of the world. And I personally think that the world has this force of goodness in it, and that force of goodness is what I call God. And so, when I write about a scarecrow standing in a garden, or whales coming up out of the sea, or dogs passing away into a spirit life, I can't imagine writing about those things without some reference to what I think is the God that created them. I just have this basic practical assumption that there's a Creator, and that the Creator is still around.

Kate: But you don't equate God and preachers.

Cynthia: Personally, I don't think that you'll find God in a pulpit. But, you know, what do I know? That's just my experience.

When I was growing up, I was always afraid that God would punish me if I didn't agree with the truth that that particular preacher was preaching in Beaver Baptist Church or the Shady Spring Baptist Church or whichever church it happened to be. And for many years while I was growing up, I was afraid of being punished by God. And if I died, I was afraid of going to hell if I didn't accept everything a particular man who got a job as a preacher at that church, if I didn't accept everything he said and agreed with it. So I struggled with that through my childhood and adolescence. Then finally when I became an adult, I just made my own relationship with God.

And I really don't need anybody else's truth, anybody else's version of God or image of God. I don't need their long list of rules and absolutions to feel valuable in this world. If I never set foot in a church again, I know that I am beloved, and that I will always be with the creator of this universe.

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Kate: There's not enough time in this program to sample all of Cynthia's writing - the Henry and Mudge books, the Mr. Putter and Tabby books - but now, we'll hear some excerpts of her writing for people who are not children.

24 **Kate**: First, from her novel, *I Had Seen Castles*. She decided to write it after she read some interviews with World War II veterans in the newspaper.

Cynthia: I realized that these were men who may have sold me insurance, may have put gas in my car, may have taken my quarter at the toll booth. I realized that these men were still walking around us and living in our neighborhoods. And we had no idea that the fellow mowing his grass was somebody who was once nineteen, watching his friends be blown apart in World War II. And I felt that I wanted to write something for these men. My own father had been in the tank division, and from what I understand from members of his family, he did see his best friend die beside him. And who knows how that might have contributed to my father's eventual death from too much drinking after her got out of the Army?

So I wanted to write a novel. And at first, I thought that it wouldn't be right because I had not lived it, but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I finally decided that if I could simply imagine the feelings and emotions, then maybe it would be OK for me to try to write the novel. So for about six months, I read lots and lots of books on World War II, the books in which men talked about what it was really like, not the Hollywood version of being in the war.

And then when I was finished reading, I sat down and thought about a novel to follow a boy from the time he gets the "verve" to join the war and he's all excited, and follow him through until he comes out the other end of the war with what he has realized about it.

Kate: Joe Dobbs of Teays Valley, WV, reads from that book.

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Back home, people were making more money than they ever dreamed possible, and they were saving it up to buy houses and cars and refrigerators when the war was finally done. Those who had no sons in combat were dancing at the USO or sitting beside their radios, engrossed in tales of cities taken and bombs hitting their marks and enemy ships going down. At the drugstore, the young women behind the counters were lining up the lipsticks to form a V.

And in Europe, someone was sobbing for his mother and searching for his arms.
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I had loved Walker Evans' work for many years because he had done a book with a writer who is one of my very favorite writers, named James Agee. And they traveled the South. Walker took photographs of the country people in the South, and James Agee wrote about them. And they actually lived in their houses and became entwined in their lives.

And I found out that Mr. Evans photographs were public domain, which means that anyone may publish them, because he did them as part of a government project. As government property, they were available to all the public. So I chose some of his public domain pictures and I wrote poems in response to the images that I saw.

Kate: Did you sit and stare at the picture?

Cynthia: Yes, and I didn't have to sit long. I wrote this book in probably a day and a half. There must have been 200 pictures in that book that I looked at. My eyes would scan the pages, and I would just stop at a photograph and look at it just for a few seconds, and I would write a poem immediately. I didn't edit, and I didn't revise. It was just very spontaneous.

29 **Cynthia**: This is a picture of a pair of scuffed-up old boots, old men's shoes. And the title of this poem is "Shoes."

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31 **Cynthia**: This is a Walker Evans photograph with a small barefoot boy in a tenant farmer's shack. He's on an old chair, beat-up chair, looking directly at the camera. The title of the poem is "Photograph."

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As I've grown older though, I find that I want to go back there because I know that there is such beauty and spirituality in those mountains. I'd like to find more of it and write about it. When I think about writing a novel for adults, I always return in my mind to the hills of Appalachia.

music

34 **Kate**: A lot of people listening to this program might be thinking, "I'd really like to write something. I have something to say." Do you have some advice for them?

Cynthia: What I find often is that people who do feel a pull to write will sometimes distract themselves with reading all the books about what's trendy, what's being bought in New York, or they will go to all the conferences to figure out some way to plug in some trick, some magic key. And as they're busy doing this, they sometimes simply forget to sit at home and read fine writing. Because I do think it's like preachers who learn to preach from other preachers. There's a certain cadence. There's a certain rhythm. There's a certain buildup to those "Hallelujahs" that get those people to flock down the aisles of a church. And any young man or woman who is raised in that environment has an innate sense of how that works. And so for me, because the genre that I was most attracted to was children's books, I read tons of them. And I tried to read the very best. When I found the very best, I made sure I had a copy of my own, and I would re-read it and re-read it until I had that sense, that innate sense.

The other thing is, it's really just the cost of a postage stamp. You still, even in this world of conglomerates and corporations and so forth, you can still be published by sending in something in the mail. It costs only the price of postage to put it in the mail and see to what happens, and to do that over and over and over again as you are expressing yourself on paper.

You know, when children ask me how to become better writers, I always tell them to go out and play. Sometimes, you just miss way too much sitting at a table with a blank sheet of paper in front of you. It's really important to just live life and wait for inspiration and write when your heart or your humor moves you to.

35 **Kate**: We've been talking with much-loved children's book writer, Cynthia Rylant, from Beaver, West Virginia. We'll end with a section from her autobiography for young kids, *Best Wishes.*

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I try to do a little work for them while I'm there. I like to take Grandmama to the grocery or plant flowers in her yard. And, of course, I always bring plenty of copies of my newest book. They're all very proud of my books.

When it's time to leave, everybody hugs me and tells me drive careful and come back real soon. We wave as I drive off down the road, and we all feel a little sad for a while.

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