

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!

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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*.

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.

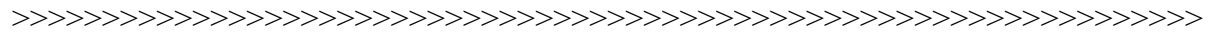
And I really don't need anybody else's truth, anybody else's version of God or image of God. I don't need their long list of rules and absolutes to feel valuable in this world. If I never set foot in a church again, I know that I am beloved, and that I will always be with the creator of this universe.

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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.

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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