A Conversation with Patricia MacLachlan

PATRICIA AUSTIN

I began this interview with Patricia MacLachlan in March, 1996 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the Children’s Book Festival where she received the USM Medallion for her distinguished contribution to children’s literature and continued talking with her by phone at her Massachusetts home.

PA In previous interviews, articles, and speeches, you’ve talked about what led you to write children’s books, how you get ideas, and how you go about writing and revising. I know that there has been an interview published in Language Arts and that you did that delightfully warm Trumpet Club audiotaped interview which my students just love listening to. So I want to begin with some questions that address different issues. I want to plumb a different background. I know that you used to teach kids and that you’ve taught children’s literature at Smith College.

PM I taught for two years, junior high and then I had a family and I didn’t want to go back to teaching because I found having my own kids much more interesting to me at that time. It was in the days when you didn’t have to go back to work which so many people have to do now.

PA Are you currently teaching children’s lit-

Patricia Austin, TALL’s Roaming Editor is assistant professor of children’s literature at University of New Orleans, College of Education.
PM No, I'm not. I taught for about eight years at Smith. I'm not doing it now because it took so much energy to do it well that it really took away from my writing. I am, however, next year going to teach in the graduate program at Vermont College in Montpelier. There's an eleven day residency for graduate students in children's books. It's a writing program and then you correspond with these people and meet them again for eleven days at the end and I thought, that I can take. But I don't teach so much anymore.

PA Thinking about your own background in education as well as your visits to schools as a writer and thinking about the increased emphasis that educators have placed on children's literature, what do you hope that teachers and librarians will do with your books in the classroom?

PM Well, many of them already are using my books in amazing ways and there are a lot of wonderful teachers out there. I know we hear a lot of negative things about the school system and it always annoys me because there are so many wonderful teachers doing great things. What these children do is create all kinds of learning units around the books. They bake bread and they plant and they get married. They have a wedding. I have more pictures of little children in bridal dresses. They go through the whole thing.

I guess it's easier for me to talk about what I hope that they don't do. I loathe the idea of teachers teaching themes. One of the things that frustrates me is when a class writes and says something about 'your theme,' I think I don't have a theme. It's a story and I try to tell it as beautifully as I can so it'll make people ask questions. So I don't really want them talking about that. There are many many themes. If the teacher talks about the theme a whole lot, it doesn't let the child make the book his or her own. So that's my pet peeve in life. I hate the word theme, because what it's doing is trying to reduce everything to something that you can write down in one sentence or a paragraph. It's much more complicated that that. Look for beauty, character and how they come together, but don't dissect plot and theme. In my family growing up and then with my own children, books were used to raise questions, to elevate you to new places. That's what we owe to our children. They don't see themselves as valued in their own literature.

So, I hope that teachers see books as not the end. I don't set out in my books to answer questions. I set out for them to go further and to ask more questions. So I hope they see books as leaps into other books and history, a study of history, and a study of people and journals of people who crossed the country.

And I hope, in a way, that they use them for kids to write in journals, because I know that's what happened. Anna started in the book, in Sarah, Plain and Tall, writing in journals. I've just started the third Sarah, Plain and Tall and I realize as my husband pointed out to me I've done a really interesting thing without being aware of it. Anna is now old enough to go to school in town which is what they did then and so Caleb is now the voice and he's telling the story and Anna's given him the notebooks and says, 'You write the story.' And he says, 'But I'm not a writer,' and she says, 'No, everyone isn't a writer, but everyone can write.' And I realize that sometimes what I get upset with is that teachers try to make their children into writers when they're not. It's very hard to be a writer in the first place. I'm not sure if I'm making this clear, but it's that they're trying to push kids to express things when it's not the time to do it. Does that make sense to you?

PA In a way, yes, but I feel there's a really viable movement in education to encourage children to see themselves as writers. One of the things that I want students to see, at all levels
that I teach, is where writers get ideas, so that they in turn don't use another writer's ideas but see that they get their own ideas in the same way. I think it's important that the more we recognize kids as writers themselves, the more valuable it is to enable students to come understand something about the craft of the writer.

PM Very good teachers are good at whatever they do. They encourage them and get kids to write wonderful things but there is this sense that there is so much red lining going on in kids' writing that who would want to write? So I encourage teachers to have a place for kids to write where it doesn't get corrected—where they can look back on their own writing and see how much better they've gotten on their own. I think that's part of the learning process. That's what authors do. We go back to our earlier books. I probably would have written them differently. When a book comes in and I'm seeing it for the first time and I wrote it the year before, I see how I'd change it. Some teachers have a sense of right and wrong that's appalling to me. There's a sense that there's one way to write a book and you've got to do it this way and I don't think they invite kids to be imitators which is how you learn. You imitate books that you love. One teacher said to me, 'well that's imitating.' And I thought that's the way we all learn. It's the same way that you become a good human being. You find a hero that you can model yourself after. We're inspired by books and we try to write, so I feel very sad for the kids who love books but they can't seem to write the way the teachers want them to write. It negates the thing all over again. That's what I mean by saying that all children aren't writers.

PA One of the ways I try to facilitate a child's understanding of the craft of writing and something that I've done for years in my own classes is to highlight an author of the week. I read a lot of a particular author's books and invariably the students make observations about things they notice. I know many of us in the education field recommend author studies in the classroom. Do you have thoughts on that?

PM Well, I think it's interesting if children know a little bit about the author because invariably what they don't realize is that the author's stories come from the author's life and landscapes. Because my son, John, and I have worked on this book, _Five Authors: Their Lives, Literature, and Landscape_ the whole idea is that you write out of your own history and your own connections, and you write out of your own problems. You don't just pick a topic at random. It's important for children to realize that writers are not disconnected from their work in any way. There's a reason each author writes what he or she does. And in a sense, that relates to the students' own writing. Children have to write about their own issues and very often they're not encouraged to do that.

Robert Penn Warren says you write a story to answer a question you have or to solve a problem. If there's no problem or question, there's no need to write and that's the only way writing speaks to me. Sometimes teachers don't understand that with children. And so, helping children to make issues their own and then writing about them changes life. One kid said to me, 'What you're talking about is that you write in your books to make life the way you want it,' and I said, 'You're right.' It's important for kids to realize that, which is why in school I could never write about what I did on summer vacation, because I made it up. I made up my diary. My diary was entirely creative. I had boyfriends all over the planet. I made up my whole youth because I thought it wasn't exciting enough and kids think that. They talk about _Sarah, Plain and Tall_ which they usually have liked and I say that comes out of my mother's past. The oral history movement is doing amazing things for this. If you interview your aunts and uncles and grand-
parents, the most wonderful stories come out of everyday life. So this is what I try to convince students somehow.

PA Let's get back if we can to the activities that you mentioned that are spawned by your books.

PM Basically I've seen children do everything from whole history units and plant wheat in the wheat fields from *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Or they write to students on an island because they want what was different about living on an island like in *Baby*. They got a correspondence going. Things like this I find not narrowing but broadening experiences.

PA It seems somehow false, inauthentic, and almost tangential to the book if teachers tell children to do this. Yet if such activity arises naturally in the lives and play of children, it feels like a significantly different activity. Children have made a choice to internalize the book in their own way.

PM I think that's the way it is anyway. I feel that we're kind of dumping on teachers here and I feel I can readily do that since I was once one. But I don't want this to come out as anti-teacher and the way things are done. But I do get a lot of stuff that's child directed. They want to write their own plays. One child wrote a whole play of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* from the cat, Seal's point of view.

PA That's fabulous.

PM It's such a great idea because here was this child taking the story and changing the point of view which shows that she really understood the story and yet took it further. These things I really love.

PA You seem to indicate that these activities were kid driven, or were they teacher driven?

PM They're probably teacher-driven, but the kids take them and make them their own. Very often, to me, the best classrooms are those where the teacher trusts the children. Once the tone is set for trust, it lets the children find their own projects and they very often do. I know with *Journey*, some amazing projects have come out of using the camera to discuss the family—what a family's about using photographs. One child sent me a whole photo album of the family, but she didn't have a family. She was a foster child, so she created one. And she found a grandfather and a grandmother. This is kind of an amazing way of seeing yourself where you are in life.

PA Well, I don't particularly want to dump on teachers either, but I do want to make them aware of some of the ways that they miseducate.

PM Well, you know I can't say enough about how long it took me to become a writer because I was told in elementary school, 'Well, you're certainly not going to be a writer, are you?' Because they didn't like the way I was doing it. They didn't think it was the right way.

PA That's incredible.

PM It's an amazing thing to say anyway. But for me, I just wouldn't write where anybody would see what I wrote for years and years.

PA Did you ever send that teacher one of your books?

PM I think early on that teacher took credit for my being a writer. Very interesting. But you know it's such a destructive and horrible thing to say and I took it to heart. You're dealing with a kid's writing. This is the most personal thing they can offer you. When you think about it, if they're doing it right not only are they putting down personal feelings, but they're putting down language skills and everything that the teacher has supposedly taught them. So they're very vulnerable. I think writers who write professionally aren't so vulnerable on that. We have copy editors to correct our spelling and misuse of the language so that by the time we keep writing we craft our skill. But we don't
get up and read our writing in front of a classroom with somebody in the back judging it. That’s very dangerous when it comes to writing.

Another reason that took me so long to write is because I kept getting assignments and they weren’t my issues. I think kids have to somehow find their own issues, make their own issues more understandable to themselves by writing about them. And so, that’s important for teachers to know to.

Kids today though know a lot about process, more than they did when I was young. So they ask me what I do when I get stuck. Do I go to something else? And is it true that something short is harder to write than something long? The other day I spent the day with fifteen kids in fourth grade and they had all these questions written on the board and I walked in and I thought my gosh, this is truly amazing, because this is what I talk about with my group of adult writers and here are these children thinking about these things.

PA Can you remember some of the questions?

PM They asked, ‘what do you do when you get writer’s block?’ And we had this big discussion about what writer’s block is. That’s a very hard thing to deal with with kids too. They see it as kind of a tuberculosis—the whole idea of you can’t do it because you have an assignment. I said I can just wait and go back to a piece many times. I can go to lunch or take a vacation and I don’t have to hit my deadline. I just don’t get paid until I do it and they hadn’t thought about that. So they have that question. Then they have questions about what are my favorite characters that I’ve written about and ‘are any of them taken from real life?’ They’re very interested in how very much my family is ingrained in my books and scenes from our life are in there and I talk about that a lot because often they just don’t consider their lives literature-worthy and so we talk a lot about that. And they want to know who my favorite authors are and what do I read. These are all questions that adults ask as well.

PA Who do you read?

PM I read everything. Mysteries when
I'm working because I don't have to do heavy thinking and yet I know I can't go to bed without reading. And then when I'm about to start writing, I get books that I consider beautiful or poetry, and they serve as a model. I read Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Jane Smiley.

PA Anyway, they're great questions.

PM They are. They also asked me if there was ever a book that I was ashamed of.

PA Wow. That's a risky question.

PM It's a very risky question in the sense that I said, 'It sounds like maybe you got a bad mark on a test,' and the student said, 'Yeah, I did.' And I said, 'That's not the same way you feel.' And we got into the whole thing about how you grow as a writer and something that you wrote when you were just beginning your writer's career, you might not write today. The most important thing is that I bring my manuscript and I show them that I don't get it the way I want it the first time. Because there is this terrible sense of perfectionism that if you don't get it right the first time it's wrong or that writers are writers because they do get it right the first time. They think I happily sit down and write a story, so I tell them how my writing day goes and how I don't have a serene relationship with my work. I show them the six or seven times of how Sarah, Plain and Tall was written over. They're fascinated by the fact that we have a lot in common. That I have an editor; they have a teacher who basically stands at the head of the class.

PM I'm aware of one that's not bad and others which I'm not in favor of and I've talked about it with the people and told them what I didn't like about it.

PA Do publishers of these guides have to ask your permission for this?

PM I think early on they didn't and there was one that I didn't mind because they were doing wonderfully wild and woolly things that were student motivated but no, those of us who have our books made into those are generally very disagreeable to the whole idea. What happens is that those are the very things that turn us off in elementary school. And the notion that the products you produce are what you grade a student by rather than the enjoyment of it! I certainly don't mind book discussions because I think that's what books are meant to do, but as a rule, I find that many of these things turn children off of reading, and they don't want to read any more. I think it was Ken Goodman, the whole language advocate, who told me the story of a kid who said, 'I really liked that book so much that I cried so hard I could hardly answer the comprehension questions at the end.' And the point of that was that's the kind of thing that I'm afraid people are doing. I think even if they...
didn't publish those, some teachers would do it anyway. I mean there's that sense that you have to give them homework and make them study something to death. That's one of the very reasons that it took me until I was in my thirties to write. You can quote me on that.

PA I can't emphasize too much how important it is for teachers to get beyond worksheets. I showed one of these published units about *Sarah, Plain and Tall* to a teacher who is in a school that creates a very rich and literate environment; she was as appalled as I was. She said she couldn't imagine giving this to her students. They would say, what is this for? There's one language arts activity, for example, where there is a story web and students have a place to diagram setting, main characters, problem, and solution. Then there's a little comparison chart to fill in—things about Maine Sarah missed and what replaced things she missed. It's so embarrassing, so inane. And then there's this art activity that makes a little character mobile and a math activity where the students figure the cost of a newspaper ad for a wife.

PM I think literature is very different from a worksheet mentality. It should invite students to take risks and to think creatively and to maybe write their own things. In some ways these novel units suppress this.

PA In some ways?

PM They're just not productive. They're a horrible idea. But I'll tell you one thing, there are some kids who are not writers and there are some kids that don't think very creatively. So I could see why they use these with some kids who need to learn a different way, but for the most part I just think they take away all the things that we write for which is to write something beautiful and to invite thought and invite the kind of discussion that surround a book that invite kids into further books. Or different kinds of books or their own research. So that's what I'm so opposed to.

PA With all that we've been talking about what teachers do with books, what implications does this have for teacher education—for teaching teachers about children's literature? I guess I'm asking in a sense, what you did with your college students.

PM I had a great array of students—some who were fulfilling a literature requirement, some who would go on and become illustrators and art students, so it wasn't just for teachers. But there were teachers in there. What we did, it was an overview of children's literature so I took it historically from England and America. Then we took every genre. We did picture books and we did easy readers and all those kinds of things and did a session on each. I was lucky because I have a lot of friends who are writers and so Natalie Babbitt and Jane Yolen would come and talk about fantasy, and Barry Moser or Jane Dyer would come and talk about illustrating in the book and how they saw it from their point of view and then somebody would come and talk about folklore and Bob Cormier came once and talked about young adult literature.

PA Unbelievable. What an opportunity for your students, not just studying with you but hearing from all these other authors as well.

PM I have this great array of friends that I can get. Masha Rudman came and talked about issues in children's literature which was a completely different point of view from everyone else. So that's kind of what I did. And what I did was have them write. Because it takes me sometimes a year to write a story, I'm not going to say to you 'Write a story and have it ready for next week,' but I had them begin something. Begin a folktale. I got the most interesting beginnings and because they didn't have to finish it, many finished them or they would come up with the most amazing beginnings of stories. And I'd have them begin an historical novel because that's a very tricky issue. You have to get the time and the period and you have to educate and yet show in a sense...
that there are certain universals where we're more alike than different, whether it's medieval times or 1990. So that worked very well with me.

PA Doesn't that say a lot about compulsion? When you don't have to do something, you want to?

PM True, none of us do very well with deadlines and when I tell children, what shocks them more than anything is how long it takes me to write a story, and one little kid will say, Mrs. So and So makes us do it in two days.

PA Right, and that's the problem.

PM That is the problem. You know I can't answer that with them because they're in a different place than I am.

PA I'm always jealous of little kids who can turn out a story quickly. They finish something and I'm still batting around the first sentence.

PM When I taught kids I taught the same way. I taught a summer writing workshop with kids and I said, 'You don't have to finish these.' We'd go to the art museum and write about that and we'd listen to music and write and go on field trips to the greenhouse. They did great fantasy stuff in the greenhouse. But they ended up finishing everything and this one little kid said to me, 'I could do this because you told me I didn't have to finish it, so I tried to write my beginning as good as I could and then the whole thing became better.'

PA That's kind of fascinating, because that's the way it successfully works for you. That's interesting. I was fascinated that in the Trumpet Club interview you had said you write the first chapter and then revise it to just the way you want it before going on to chapter two.

PM That's right.

PA Which is fascinating because Katherine Paterson says, just get through it.

PM She gets it all down.

PA And then she goes back through it. Well of course you all rewrite.

PM Yes, but it's clear that there is no one right way to write a book.

PA That's another wonderful thing to share with kids.

PM That's so important because I think too many teachers feel that there's a set way to do things that is the right way, and it discourages children who don't work in that mode.

PA For some people it may be the visual first.

PM Exactly. That's right.

PA Once you've carved each chapter, do you then go back when the book is finished?

PM I go back and look through it and I usually end up throwing out a million smiles. I guess I'm a happy person, because the people in my book are always smiling. I usually have twenty or twenty-five smiling scenes where I throw out the word smile. It's funny how you are and what you take out. Then it goes to the editor and then usually there's another rewrite. So I'm used to doing that. And I don't like rewriting at all. There are friends of mine who are writers who love it. They see it as another eye. By the time I get through writing, I'm ready to go on. Another character is tapping me on the shoulder and I'm thinking about somebody else.

PA So you talked about having your college students begin writing historical fiction? How did you do the research for Sarah, Plain and Tall, clearly recognized as historical fiction since you got the O'Dell Award for it.

PM From all my reading, I knew the period. I'd read so many journals, from people who went out west earlier and those that came later. So what I read mostly were the writings of the people. There are a number of books about pioneer women. I read but I didn't write things down. I immersed myself into the period. I didn't read other books
and I can't believe I'm telling you this, but I've never finished *The Little House on the Prairie* books. I really have to sit down and read them because so many people bring them up. So I really don't read so much of the literature of the time but the writings of the people themselves.

PA Those are primary sources and they're more important and enhance accuracy anyway.

PM Also, you know, I grew up out there and my father who is 94 had all these stories that he told. And so I had a sense of how the people lived and what the pace was. So that's more the research that I did.

PA Do you anticipate doing more historical fiction?

PM Not really, although I am working on a third Sarah. So I guess I am. I was always so amazed that I got an award for historical fiction because I was not a good history student because they didn't teach it in a way that I thought, well, the way that they're now teaching it. We were given facts to memorize.

PA I was talking to a nine year old girl who said 'Oh, I just love history because it's one great big story.'

PM Well, thank God. That kid has a great teacher.

PA She does.

PM Because it is one great story. I said to my husband the other day that I'm going to die without knowing a lot more history than I do and I think it's great that they're making it into a story because it is, a big saga.

PA What other things did you do with your college students?

PM Well, we wrote and I had lecture people, and they wrote research papers on say, three novels of their own choosing and they would compare them as to language, history, periods, different styles, and so on. Those were the literature students that tended to do that. Then others would take issues, some kids took (I can't think of all, I had 110 students) say twenty picture books and discussed stereotypes in these picture books and some found amazing horrendous things. So everything you could think of was written about. Nobody did a book of their own for it because it wasn't a writing course but kind of a research course. They wanted to discuss everything. Of the students who came the first day thinking it would be a gut course because it was children's literature, about ten would drop out after the first lecture when they saw the syllabus. I had a series of twenty books they had to read. I would change them according to who was coming that year. I had them read Natalie Babbitt when she came. Some did papers on, is children's literature just for children?—and things like that. I had them read studies of children's literature and read articles that Maurice Sendak wrote and they did a lot of research. So they were interesting.

PA You said that some of your students were teachers?

PM And they were great. Because most of the ones that were in there were what I call brilliant teachers and some of them brought their students from time to time and they'd sit in on the course and so we sometimes had a mixture of children and adults talking about books.

PA That's fabulous.

PM Which was really great. That's a really good way to do it because they think so differently. College students, say who are nineteen, are caught in this funny little time, almost like junior high in a way. They're in a terrible stage between childhood and adulthood. When you go to college, you're really sheltered. It isn't real life. So they were really interested in what children had to say and what teachers had to say, so it was an interesting conglomeration. I liked it but it took all my energy.
PA I don’t know how you could have written anything and taught college at the same time.

PM Well, I didn’t for a while, so I finally stopped doing it.

PA One thing I’ve done both with college students and elementary students is to first read a passage from Sarah, Plain and Tall and then watch a corresponding part of the film. I selected chapter 3 and then showed about a ten minute clip—from Jacob’s going to the station to pick up Sarah to her arrival at the Whitten homestead and Anna’s turning away the stone. The college students reacted strongly to the change of characterization. They saw a yearning Anna in the book, a young girl hoping that things would work out with this new mother. They saw a resentful Anna in the movie, a young girl pushing Sarah away. They wanted to ask why would MacLachlan let anyone do that. And of course, I told them that you had written the screenplay yourself. They immediately wanted to know then why you made that change.

PM Well, it’s interesting. A book is not just static. It doesn’t just sit there. When we were talking to the movie people, they said, you know it occurred to us that in the book it’s told from the child’s point of view and the child does yearn for a mother because that’s her voice and her privacy but in truth would she not be a little bit resentful of this woman coming, and I said, yes, she probably would. When you’re doing a movie which is from a more global point of view, then this child is going to be pretty wary at the beginning of a woman coming in and taking over her job because she was the mother figure. She took care of her father and her brother. I see it both ways and there’s no one right answer. And it made sense to me that she’d be a little bit resentful but not overbearingly so and it doesn’t last very long.

PA Interestingly enough, some third and fourth graders recognized the same thing. Yet the kids saw the movie as more realistic because none of them could imagine readily accepting having someone take their mother’s place.

PM I think that’s basically it. When you’re telling a story from the child’s point of view, you can get into their head and you’re telling a slight story of the coming of a mother, but in the movie, it is different and you have to show what the movie people call tensions. I don’t usually put them in very much in my books, but that one made sense to me. It made the fact that Anna and Sarah came together even more poignant.

PA When I read your work, it seems as if I’m reading about people you know and that I’m viewing a scene that you’ve played out and watched unfold, almost as if you’re writing on location. I can pick up any of your books and I get that feeling, like in this passage from Baby:

Lalo Baldelli and I sat on the porch swing, clapping our hands over our ears when the six o’clock ferry whistle blew, and inside, as always, my father began to tap-dance on the coffee table. It was a low, tiled table, blue and green Italian marble.
It comes across to me as a reader that you're recording what you're seeing as you're seeing it. Is my question making sense?

PM Yes, it does and in a sense you're right because I tend to write cinematically. I pretend in a sense that I'm watching the scene unfold and sometimes when children and I talk about it, they'll say 'We never thought about that.' In other words, they're viewing it. The scenes rise and fall, which makes them able to be translated into film a lot. I have to know the place before I begin a story because the place and the people are intertwined. They're not separate. I have started stories in the past that haven't worked and I realize I didn't have my place, my landscape so it wasn't working.

PA I've heard this from other people.

PM It's just absolutely the truth and I had a hard time when I was writing _The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt_ because I live in the country, very much in the country and my books seem to be all my landscape and that was more of a city one. They were going to a conservatory, so I had to go to the city, because I didn't have the city right. There are sounds that are different, smells that are different, like city buses. We don't have many buses out in the country. I have to have that landscape, but it's interesting that you read that passage because I read this to some class and a woman stood up and said 'That's Block Island, Rhode Island and by God, it was and I thought, I am so brilliant. But no, she lived there and she somehow saw that. It's a place I've always loved. I haven't been back for fifteen years, but it's so ingrained in me what it's like that it was there as I began it, and the tap dancing came from, I'm such a spy, Christopher Walken the leading man in _Sarah, Plain and Tall_ and _Skylark_ is a tap dancer and he started out that way. He will tap dance on any really good surface, so that marble tables sounded perfect to me. So this is a real combination of my imagination and serendipity—taking bits and pieces of people that I'm interested in and have talked to.

PA A lot of it is then in your memory or imagination, but truly your seamless prose makes it sound as if you're just watching it unfold.

PM Well, that seamless prose does not come without going back and forth, throwing out words, tossing them out and rearranging. I tend to use a computer much like people use a typewriter. I print out time after time and then I just carve away.

PA Apropos to writing habits and what your writing day is like, one of my teacher friends said, 'You've got to find out if she really writes with the television on?'

PM Yeah, it's on right now. On mute. I'm watching CNN.

PA I think it was in a piece about you that your husband wrote for _Horn Book_. He mentioned that you write with the television on and this teacher said, 'I can't believe it. I can't believe it. You've got to find out.'

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PA I think it was in a piece about you that your husband wrote for _Horn Book_. He mentioned that you write with the television on and this teacher said, 'I can't believe it. I can't believe it. You've got to find out.'

PM I have a very hard time writing in total silence. So it's just what I do. I come in here and put the television on and look at the news and patter around. When I am deeply involved with something, maybe half the day goes by and I don't know what's been on but there's been a life out there. I think it's because it's so isolating and with the television on, I'm aware that there's news going on, that there's a world and that what I'm doing is not the most important thing in the world. So it's just my little habit. I guess my children grew up this way. I didn't grow up that way because I didn't have television until I was in high school so it's a whole new thing. But I noticed that when my kids were little, they'd have the television on and they'd be reading their books at the same time. I think it's the age. I'd go in sometimes and turn the TV off and none of them would notice. So
maybe it’s the age we’re growing up in, maybe it’s the child in me. But most of the time I do.

PA That same teacher wanted to know what drives you as a writer. She’s noted that you’re writing the same story over and over again. I remember a speech Marion Dane Bauer once gave when she said she never realized that she wrote the same story.

PM I realized it many years ago. I said to Charlotte Zolotow, ‘I feel like I’m writing the same story over and over again,’ and she said, ‘Aren’t we all?’ So in a sense, in a way, everybody does. I was thinking about that when Richard Egielski was talking about his work, that he’s writing the same kinds of chase things, kind of loss of innocence kinds of things. I’m not sure I’m writing the same story but I’m writing about family. They’re very important to me and the whole idea of what makes us alike and what brings us together and how we make connections and who we care for and who we love. That’s what’s important to me and that’s probably what I explored in Baby—how we really affect each other, how important we are and what we say. And in Journey, it’s that way. I have this more global idea of what family is than mother, father, child. And I think we have to have a more global view because it isn’t that way anymore so much.

PA In Cassie Binegar, Arthur for the Very First Time, The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt, and Journey, you’re dealing with a kid who is having a serious conflict with parents—not an outward but an inside conflict. It’s as if they’re struggling with what the parent-child relationship is supposed to be.

PM True, but it is the place of teenagers or preteenagers to push away from their families, so they’re doing their jobs, these children. I see this in various ways. I think it’s always very interesting how we figure out who we are in life and what’s important in life and that’s what happens in all of those books. Where do we fit in?

PA You also deal to a very large extent with the nature of truth. Your characters are taking a very philosophic look at life and themselves. They’re questioning what’s true and untrue. What drives you, or any writer to tell the same story?

PM I’m trying to see what keeps me going. I can only write when I have some problem I’m thinking of and that’s how I deal with it. Now in Baby, my children had all left and I didn’t have any more babies and that’s pretty simple to see how that novel came about and I thought, ‘Should I go and adopt a baby?’ which of course I’m not going to do, so this is how I deal with it. And in Journey, I was writing it when my mother was leaving me. The new thing I’m going to start working on—I don’t know if it’s going to work or not. I looked at my son’s license and he’s a donor and I said, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re a donor. I know a lot of people who believe in that but don’t go down and sign up. I was overcome with this ambivalent kind of feeling. He said ‘I have these photographer eyes and somebody should have them.’ I was very proud and at the same time, as a parent you play over and over in your mind him dying and his eyes being given. As a writer, you can’t help but do this. So I’m going to write a story about a boy, it’s called Edward’s Eyes. This is where it comes from. I’m dealing with certain anticipated or possible losses or what ifs in what happens around me.

PA And I can’t help but wonder if both Journey and the new book you described don’t stem from the loss of your mother to Alzheimer’s. It’s easier to look at the loss in a different way.

PM Of course it is. And in a sense children deal with losses all the time and we as a society are not good to our children. They’re always victims and I’m always conscious of the child taking the power. I don’t evaluate my work very often but as I look back, all the
children create the momentum for change. In *Baby*, Larkin causes her parents to look at the death of their baby which I think, without her, they would have gone on for a long time without doing. And in *Journey* the little boy really brings about the whole thing about the father and mother, so I’m conscious of children getting some power because they don’t have it in life, I give it to them in my stories. I find that happening all the time.

**PA** So much of the craft of writing is in the subtleties—like the way you switched back and forth from past to present tense narrative in *Journey*, the images that you create. I wonder how much of this is intuitive and how much is intended, crafted. That’s probably a stupid question.

**PM** No, it’s an interesting question because I think a lot of it is intuitive. It may have been the way I grew up. My father wrote. He wrote textbooks, but he told stories that were full of subtleties. And I began to pay attention to the subtleties because I think it’s that that make up the kind of meat. I was never much interested in plot so nothing that I write is heavy in plot. It’s all about character and how we go through life. So in a way, I think, that’s the way I am. When we were all younger and had young children, we would trade off babysitting chores with the teacher friends of mine, I’d tell them all the things their kids had said and they’d say, ’Did you make that up? They never say those great things in front of me.’ It’s just that I paid attention. So I think it’s the way I am although I try to develop that and hone it because that’s what fascinates me about life and I guess I have to write about what fascinates me or it doesn’t work.

**PA** I used to drive my elementary students crazy because when they’d say things, I’d tell them, ”We have to write that down; it’s a poem.”

**PM** Well, that’s it. Everything is a story. Barry Moser and I were talking about that when somebody in the South would say something, someone else would say, ’Well, let me tell you about my Uncle Edgar,’ and then it would be a story, and everything leads to a story. That’s kind of the way I grew up. I see life as a story and everything I look at that seems interesting at all I start fashioning into a story.

**PA** Can I ask specifically about *Journey*? When I was reading it, I was probably halfway through the book before I realized that you switched back and forth between past and present tense. I wondered what was behind your decision.

**PM** Usually, it’s a gut thing. And usually for me, the past tense is fairly lyrical. You can be maybe a little more poetic. The present tense is so immediate. You can get so much into the character’s mind that it’s really a writer’s little gimmick in a way. It just happens that way. I do that a lot because that’s the way you can show the reader what it’s like in the writer’s head. I do it in *Baby* with the dream.

**PA** Yes.

**PM** There is this sense that you know exactly what’s going on in this person’s head without describing it, by having the person say it.

**PA** I found myself trying to analyze it. I wondered if each time that someone took a photograph that you wrote in the present tense, but there didn’t seem to be a pattern.

**PM** That’s very interesting. I’ll have to look back on it because mostly it’s just a gut reaction. I was moving closer and then moving away, like a camera lens.

**PA** Well in several of the books, like *Baby*, and two recent picture books *All the Places to Love*, which is one of my all time favorites and the new book, *What You Know First*, which is so beautiful, you show life as a window of opportunity, the place that when a baby is young, we teach them that everything is a seed for learning, a seedbed of memories. It’s so lovely.
A Conversation with Patricia MacLachlan  PATRICIA AUSTIN

PM Well, you know kids do have a strong sense of place. Because I grew up in the country, we all have these meadows, places where the wars took place and where the kick-the-can took place, this whole child’s village we had. And of course we lived on our bicycles so we went from place to place. I think when you live this way as a child, you're nose to nose with the ground, with the landscape. I think that's important. I think city kids don't have that same sense of place. Because they see the change of seasons in such a different way. I was thinking this when I went down the hill the other day. There were forty-seven wild turkeys coming up the hill and either they're stupid or they're arrogant but they make you wait. You have to wait until they all cross. They don't get out of your way. And then there was this farmer down the road that was training two young oxen. And then there was a child riding a pony to school and I thought, think of the kids in the city who don't see this kind of thing. So place is important.

PA But city kids are seeing different things.

PM Of course.

PA Not necessarily the things we wish our kids were seeing but they are.

PM They see a lot more people and a lot more diversity, perhaps. But for me, I'm very aware of the fact that there's only so much land. I have this real reverence for the land.

PA Well, it definitely comes across.

Whenever I’m talking about a sense of place in my literature classes, I haul out Sarah, Plain and Tall or another favorite, Jean Fritz' Homesick.

PM There’s so much about her place in Homesick. I think it's because it’s what we know first that stays with us. I really believe that. And so there is this sense of where you came from.

PA Besides just the sense of place in your books, there's such symbolic use of language. I can’t help but wonder how intentional it all is—how much you shape and intend this, and how much just happens. For instance, on p. 71 in Baby, the words “Open, close. Open, close. Open, close.” I was struck with that. The whole discussion before that is about how words open things up and create spaces for things to happen, for people to change. And I’m wondering if there’s an awareness of the symbol on your part.

PM Not always. There are times when I’ll write something and my husband will say to me, ’Don’t you see how that refers to here?” and I’ll say, ’Oh. Oh yeah, it does.’ I’m not aware of it on a conscious level, but there’s a lot of unconscious and subconscious stuff that goes on when I write. And that’s why writing is so risky for me, because I follow where the story is going without knowing why I’m doing things an awful lot of the time. I have to get in this stage where I have control of something and I can go back and weave things in and out but there’s an awful lot that I just let myself go without knowing why I’m doing it. But in that passage, it’s
also just what babies do—open, close, open, close.

PA That's it. There's the reality of the image, but also the symbolic level. Like Sophie's memories of clouds at the beginning of the chapter and the clouds of things hanging over them all.

PM I'm so aware that clouds do that. There's one point that the sun comes out when Sophie's so unhappy. I did that on purpose because it's like shining a beacon for her.

PA Since we're talking here about the writing process, I also wanted to ask you about working with other writers. You're part of a writer's group, aren't you? How do you work?

PM Mostly, we're pretty sophisticated in the skills of our group. We renegotiate all the time. And we're very protective of our rights. We'll get up and say, 'I don't want to hear this. I want you to concentrate on this.' So we take care of ourselves. We keep reminding ourselves. It's a given that we're all good writers here. In some ways that would be a good thing to do with kids. Doing a writer's group is a very iffy thing because you're friends and you like each other and you have to develop a group that's honest and that means that sometimes you're not going to hear what you want to hear. We're always treading very carefully and restating our views of the goals of the group. And even we, sometimes do not bring certain things to read, because sometimes a person will have certain tastes. And you realize that if you're reading something that is a realistic novel and someone else is interested in fantasy that you're not going to get the kind of feedback. So I guess I feel like the children do. We're very careful.

PA I'd be interested to find out more of how large a group it is and who's in it and how often you meet.

PM I think there are about six people in it now and some of us have been going for, oh my gosh, I've been going since about 1980, I guess.

PA Wow.

PM And the others were already at it. So this is a longstanding group. And we try to meet once a week, but we've gone through everything, births, deaths, everything. It's such a support group in a sense for us. To be writers, which sounds glamorous to people who are not writers, but for those of us who are writers we know you can only bitch and complain about your job when you don't have to get up and go to the office. You can eat five pounds of chocolate if you want and don't have to be there on time. You can only complain about that to other writers who know that there are downsides to it too. So we kind of help each other out.

PA Do you share chapters before you're finished a whole book?

PM We do that. In fact, this was the group where I read Sarah, Plain and Tall when I was first writing it and it was a very small book. It was like a picture book and they said, I was very personally involved with that book because it was about my mother and she had Alzheimer's disease, so they said to me, this really is not a picture book. It really should be a chapter book and they remember my being so upset that I threw it down and burst into tears. But then I went back. So we have been through a lot of hard work.

PA Do you exchange manuscripts ahead of time so everyone can read? Or do you just bring things and read them right then and there?

PM It's what people need. Some people like to do that. They would like to have it read whole. But most of the work is done in the group and it's very interesting.

PA I know I've been in writer's groups and sometimes we make very general comments and other times we actually get to the sentence structure and language level. And people will make
A Conversation with Patricia MacLachlan  PATRICIA AUSTIN

suggestions.

PM Yes, we do everything. We talk about why the character does this in this chapter for instance. And we'll write down words that don't fit right and we're very careful about saying is this the right word here? We kind of do it all. And when one of us is having a particularly hard time and getting a lot of rejections, they come in and talk about it. So we really talk about the profession as well as the writing.

PA And sometimes you literally hammer out changes right there on the spot?

PM Yeah, sometimes we talk about it right there. The fact of it is that writing is so internal and so private that there's so much of it in your head when you're writing and when it's not getting out there, it gives you an opportunity for you to test how it affects other people. Does it hit others the way it does you? And sometimes we don't take the suggestions. There have been times that all of us have gone through that, when we decided we really didn't want to take the suggestions. Thanks a lot, but no thanks because we have to learn to trust our own judgment.

PA I think teachers are trying to do that too, by saying that 'This is what I think and this is what your peers think, but essentially the story is yours and you make those final decisions as to whether you make the changes or not' which I think is really rich.

PM And that's the way it should be. That's important because one of the things that I've heard teachers say is, 'We're doing this wonderful thing. We're doing a story together.' And I always think that's unreal. You can talk about a story together, but a person has to sit down and write his or her own story. It comes from your own personal roots, so I'm just not sure that that's anything but an exercise in futility although it may teach kids how to get along and work with other ideas.

PA I think it probably explores the process of writing, so that kids can literally see how you can construct a sentence and then go back and change it. And I think it can serve that kind of purpose, although they may not write a real story. Then another thing that teachers do is to write a story about a mutual experience, so it truly is their story, so they all have input in it.

PM Their view of it.

PA So in that way, it may work, but generally it's a false kind of activity.

PM And it isn't a story that comes from a single root or a single emotional experience so often it doesn't turn out to be great literature. And I have read incredible things that children have written. I've had an opportunity to see such good writing and I'm always amazed at how wonderful some children can write. I have read some writing by kids in the 5th or 6th grade that is publishable. Kind of interesting.

PA Daunting, isn't it? Well, it looks like we've come full circle, talking about what teachers do in classrooms again. Let me just close by asking you about other plans for the future, if you don't mind talking about that.

PM No, I don't mind at all. I'm working on the third Sarah, and I'm working on the screenplay for Baby.

PA That's exciting, and interesting actually. One of the children's book reviewers of our local newspaper had wondered if you were abandoning books for Hollywood.

PM No, no I prefer writing books. It's just kind of intriguing when you write a lot of books and it's so isolating, to do another thing. You have to do something different and that's why I did the screenplays.

PA When will that come out and who'll be in it?

PM I don't know because it's really not
done yet. So probably I still have to do some revisions and I'm waiting to hear about that. They'll probably film in the fall, so it'll probably come out sometime next year.

PA That's exciting.

PM Then I've got a couple of picture books and one is something I've never done before about a little boy going to visit his father because his father has left the family and married another woman. I usually don't do issue things like that, but it came from my going to Newfoundland a lot. I have friends up north. So the boy's on a ship going to see his father. And then I'm going to do I think a picture book on a piece from my father's book. He has just written his memoirs and it's going to be published through University of North Dakota Press or something and he had a great chapter his editor said on the haying time. And I'd like to do a picture book on the haying time because it's when people came from all around, a big community effort but I don't know if that's true or not. It's just in my head. And then I have a novel to write for Delacorte which I have in my head but haven't put down. So I've got many ideas. Mostly books.

PA So you always have projects lined up, sort of waiting for you. Do you work on more than one thing at a time?

PM I do. I can do a novel and a picture book. I have a very hard time doing two novels at the same time getting into the voice. I think this is going to be a time that I have to get back to work; I haven't been working for a while.

PA Well, you have been through a difficult time over the last few years.

PM I guess you have to look at it that way. All those things get in the way. I do have friends, Jane Yolen who's in my writer's group, who write through all kinds of troubles. She goes to it as solace. I have to go to it when everything is pretty settled in my life and I can give myself over to it. We're all very different about how we do what we do.

PA Very true. Very true. Well, I want to thank you so much for sharing your insight and your time with our readers.

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