

Jacqueline Briggs Martin

Biography
Community Stories
Historical fiction

Lewiston, Maine
April 15, 1945

On Sand Island
Snowflake Bentley
The Finest Horse in Town



ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE AUTHOR'S WRITING

Jacqueline Briggs Martin first read of Wilson A. Bentley when her two children were youngsters. Bentley's story appeared in a children's magazine. She remembers reading that Bentley had said that he could not "remember a time when he did not love snow more than anything else in the world, except his mother." Several years later she and her children were walking in a snowfall and one of them mentioned that Snowflake Bentley would have loved the weather. When Martin began to think about another book to write she turned to Wilson A. Bentley. She spent hours researching this man who spent his life studying snow and taking pictures of individual snow crystals. The result was the book *Snowflake Bentley*. The book was illustrated by Mary Azarian whose hand-pressed woodcuts earned Azarian the 1999 Caldecott Award. The woodcuts reflected the strength of the rugged farm life as well as the delicate snowflakes photographed by Bentley. This book was Martin's eleventh book for children and provided a highlight in a career that began with a series of books about a lovable little mouse named Bizzy Bones.

Jacqueline Briggs Martin was born April 15, 1954 in Lewiston, Maine. Her childhood was spent on a farm, near Turner, Maine, where her parents raised five children on the dairy farm that has been in her family for seven generations. Her father, Hugh, was a dairy farmer who loved the land and loved his work; he "tended the meadow" and her mother, Alice, was "a full-time mother and bookkeeper for the farm. She is a wonderful

cook and baker and once, with friends, prepared and baked 50 apple pies in her kitchen in one day." Martin's mother has also made beautiful quilts.

Jacqueline Briggs Martin's life has always contributed bits and pieces to her writing. In her first three books the beloved meadow, which held an apple orchard, was the setting for the stories. The first of Martin's stories, *Bizzy Bones and Uncle Ezra* (Lothrop, 1984), came about when her son, Justin was just four-years-old and declared he wouldn't get out of bed. He was afraid that the wind would blow him away. Justin's childhood fears helped Martin create the first draft. Writing in her daughter Sarah's partially used school tablet, Martin began the story about a little boy afraid of the wind. Along the way, the boy in the story became a mouse who lived in a work shoe with his uncle Ezra. The mouse, like Justin, was afraid of the wind. Two more Bizzy books followed. Other childhood memories and her family made their way into the Bizzy books. Martin remembered visiting her aunt, during her own childhood, and hearing her uncle sing about "rovers and riverboat riders." That showed up in *Bizzy Bones and Moosemouse* (Lothrop, 1986), as did her daughter Sarah's name and the French horn that Sarah played during high school. In *Bizzy Bones and the Lost Quilt* (Lothrop, 1988) Martin's mother's quilts make an appearance on the clothesline of the pack rats who befriend Bizzy and Uncle Ezra and help them to find Bizzy's lost quilt.

By 1992, Martin had moved on to write a tale sparked by information she gathered one summer, about two aunts who had operated a dry goods store in Maine at the turn of the century. Few people in the town remembered her aunts but one elderly watchmaker did remember that the sisters had "the finest horse in town."

From that small bit of information Martin began to think about who might have cared for the horse while her aunts operated the dry goods store. The book presents three fictional scenarios that answered the question. Her aunts' names were Stella Prince and Zilpha Prince, but in the book Martin used her mother's name, Cara, for one aunt. The horse was named Prince. *The Finest Horse in Town* (HarperCollins, 1992) was published the same year as *Good Times on Grandfather's Mountain* (Orchard, 1992).

Good Times on Grandfather's Mountain was inspired from an article "Homer Ledford: Making Music" in the April 1989 catalog of the mail-order clothing company *Land's End*. Ledford used a pocket knife to whittle parts of his instruments and Martin used that concept to develop the main character who is so good he can whittle "a spider out of wood." His optimism is evident at every turn -- even when his house is blown down. In the end neighbors show up to help him rebuild and to enjoy his music.

While Martin was growing up in Turner, Maine she and her brother tried to rescue injured birds by putting them in shoe boxes lined with handkerchiefs. "As if there would be good vibrations just from the shoe box that would be healing. Of course we ended up burying these casualties." Years later a visit to her sister's lakeside house in Maine, where the families could hear the call of the loons as they dropped off to sleep, helped her to capture those memories. The result was *Washing the Willow Tree Loon* (Simon,

1995). Martin's husband, Richard, grew up watching birds and Martin learned to share his interest. "My family and I have bird feeders and we always watch for herons as we are driving or hiking by water. These were parts of my life but not my writing until I read an article about volunteers who go to the sites of oil spills and wash injured birds." As she researched the rescue of oiled birds she began to look for people who would populate her story as volunteer bird washers. Martin remembered the woman who visited her classroom when Martin was in third grade. The woman showed the children a hummingbird nest and talked about hummingbirds. Martin decided that someone like her should be in the story. While she was working on the book, the Martins had their house painted. The house painter was a wonderful, kind, and gentle man. He went into the book. Then Martin remembered the family who had lived up the avenue, when they first moved to their present house. The family had two pet ducks that wandered up the avenue. Martin put someone who might have been in that family in the book. Martin took her quest for information about rehabilitating injured birds to the Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, a group in Delaware. They provided Martin with a lot of help and she said, "I learned a lot writing this book and had a wonderful time thinking about the kinds of people who love and care for birds."

As a young child Martin often walked through the fields or along the lanes lined with stone walls and wondered about people who had been there before. Her curiosity brought about *Grandmother Bryant's Pocket* the story of a young girl, Sarah, who visits her grandmother's and grandfather's home after Sarah's dog Patches is killed in a fire. The small gold scissors, healing herbs, and pieces of cloth for bandages that Grandmother Bryant keeps in her pocket are important in helping Sarah accept the loss of Patches and learn to overcome her fears. While researching this story Martin discovered a book about a midwife who had lived in Maine during the 18th century and who had kept a diary. The diary provided information about the daily life in that time and gave Martin the basis for the midwife character, Sarah's grandmother, who used herbs in the healing process.

Many of Martin's books are set in rural settings that bring to mind the dairy farm in Maine where she grew up. But Martin has "always wanted to live by the water." So when she got the idea for writing a book about Simon Henry, an old fisherman, his friend Potato Kelly, and a wily catfish that Simon Henry was determined to catch, Martin sensed that she what she really had was, "a good reason to walk along rivers, talk to river people, watch fish, and sit in the sun." So as part of her research she "collected pictures of fish and rivers and imagined rivers and river people."

Her interest in gardening and how things grow brought her to write *Button, Bucket, Sky* (Carolrhoda, 1998), a story of acorns and growing trees. When Martin begins a book she prefers to write by hand. Writing by hand, she says, "keeps me from writing too fast and, for me, gives the story a better foundation. Each new book is begun in a new notebook and with a new pen. She takes all the notes for the book, from reading or just ideas, in that notebook. Once the first draft is composed Martin transfers the story to her computer. Revision is much easier on the computer and she revises, revises, and revises.

Finally when she thinks she has revised a story all that she can she puts the story away for several months. This is very difficult as she is always excited and wants to send the story off immediately but whenever she has given in and has sent the story off she ends up being embarrassed. Once a story is taken out after a couple of months she finds the blemishes, writing mistakes, shallow characters, and other flaws that she did not see in the initial writing stage.

Her interests often lead her to read or observe something that brings about a story idea. When Martin's daughter was a youngster and reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, Jacqueline and Sarah planted a wildflower garden much as Laura might have had when she was growing up. The Martin home has wonderful garden patches filled with interesting plants and flowers. Sharing cuttings from her plants or collecting seeds to give to someone who admires a particular flower is a common occurrence. So when Martin read of the real-life Home Gardening Project, begun by Dan Barker in Portland, Oregon, the story caught her interest. Barker started out with a pick-up truck dirt, and plants and in the years since he began the project he has given away thousands of gardens. And many of those who received his gardens are still growing food and plants. Martin says, "When I read of these green gifts I knew I wanted to write a children's book about them. I added the almanac so readers could begin their own gardens, in buckets, tubs, or the ground." *Green Truck Garden Giveaway: A Neighborhood Story and Almanac* (Simon, 1997) tells the story of two generous people who use their green truck to give away gardens just as Dan Barker did.

Jacqueline Briggs Martin began writing when her daughter and son were preschoolers and she was staying home with them. She wrote while they napped and when they gave up their naps, she got up at 4 a.m. to write. She wrote for nine years before she saw one of her books in published form. She had enjoyed writing as a high school and college student but the interest had lapsed while she began her family. Reading books with her children rekindled the interest. For a few years Martin taught pre-school in her home town and wrote during the time when she wasn't teaching. Now Martin is a full-time writer and her children are grown so her writing time is not restricted. Martin says, "I love writing but I can't write all day. When I'm not writing I read, or walk outside, or do the things we all have to do -- cook, wash dishes, sweep the floors. I like making quilts but only if I'm doing it with someone I love. In the warm seasons I like to work outside. I grow roses, chilies, and herbs for tomato sauce. And I work in the prairie that Sarah started in fourth grade when she was reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder books. I also enjoy tent camping, hiking, and canoeing. I love watching rivers and watching fish."

Jacqueline Briggs Martin lives in Mt. Vernon, Iowa with her husband Richard, an English professor on the Cornell College Campus. Jacqueline's mother visited their home in December of 1998 and helped to make the pies her granddaughter Sarah had requested for her wedding. Justin still plays the drums as Bizzy did in Martin's first book. Jacqueline Briggs Martin continues to write in the hope that her "stories will remain with people like the memories of old friends or good melodies and will make them smile on a quiet afternoon or a rainy day."

BOOKS AND NOTES

Ideas for Martin's books come from almost everywhere; from her family, magazine articles, and her surroundings. Regardless of the topic, Martin does extensive research about any topic included in her books. Even though she does not have direct input on the illustrations her research has, at times, aided the illustrator to create accurate illustrations. When Petra Mathers was preparing the illustrations for *Grandmother Bryant's Pocket* some of the pictures Martin had found showing some of the Maine landscape and the houses and barns of the period were sent to her, through Martin's editor. In another instance the art editor and illustrator, in an effort to draw in young readers, had agreed to illustrate a very young boy as one of the bird washers in *Washing the Willow Tree Loon*. Fortunately, Martin was apprised of the decision before the book went to press as that illustration would have compromised the accuracy of her research. Federal law prohibits underage youngsters from handling contaminated animals. The illustrator revised the illustration to show the young man as a youthful but adult male handling the bird.

Books Written by Jacqueline Briggs Martin

Bizzy Bones Series: Bizzy Bones and Moosemouse (Lothrop, 1986); *Bizzy Bones and the Lost Quilt* (Lothrop, 1988); and *Bizzy Bones and Uncle Ezra* (Lothrop, 1984). -- All illustrated by Stella Ormai. Each of the books feature a little mouse who makes his home with Uncle Ezra. In the first book Uncle Ezra helps Bizzy Bones overcome his fear of the wind. In *Bizzy Bones and Moosemouse*, Bizzy is apprehensive about staying the weekend with Uncle Ezra's friend, Moosemouse. And in the final tale Bizzy Bones loses her favorite quilt but with the help of friends his quilt, although tattered, is found and repaired.

Button, Bucket, Sky. Illustrated by Vicki Jo Redenbaugh. Carolrhoda, 1998. -- A story sure to inspire the youngest naturalists to save some acorns and to plant their own oak tree in the spring.

The Finest Horse in Town. Illustrated by Susan Graber. (HarperCollins, 1992; Purple House Press, 2003) -- At the turn of the century, Prince was the finest horse in a small town in Maine. Martin imagines three situations concerning who cares for Prince while his owners, two sisters, are operating their dry-goods store.

Good Times on Grandfather Mountain. Illustrated by Susan Graber. (Orchard, 1992) -- Old Washburn lives on the mountain with his animals. One by one the animals leave but Old Washburn retains his positive attitude as he makes music and whittles a fiddle from a log or a spider from a stick.

Grandmother Bryant's Pocket. Illustrated by Nancy Carpentar. (Simon, 1995) -- Grandmother Bryant's pocket contained her most important possessions and it was those possessions that helped her granddaughter Sarah deal with the loss of her dog Patches. Set in 1787.

Green Truck Garden Giveaway: A Neighborhood Story and Almanac. Illustrated by Alec Gillman. (Simon, 1997) -- A gardening story of two friends who giveaway gardens to their neighbors and in the process helps to build a community of friends.

Higgins Bend Song and Dance. Illustrated by Brad Sneed. (Ticknor, 1997) -- A fishing story about two friends who live next to a river where the friends watch for herons. That is until Simon Henry decides he wants to catch the wily catfish, Oscar.

The Lamp, the Ice, and the Boat Called Fish: Based on a True Story. Illustrated by Beth Krommes. (Houghton Mifflin, 2001) -- (from the publisher) In 1913, a boat called Fish, part of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, became stuck in the Arctic ice. On board were a captain and crew, scientists and explorers, a cat, forty sled dogs, Inupiaq hunters, and an Inupiaq family with two small girls.

On Sand Island. Illustrated by David A. Johnson. (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) -- (from the publisher) On that island lives a boy named Carl who wants nothing more than to be out on the water in a boat of his own making. So this is a story of sawing, nailing, and sanding. But because Sand Island neighbors are closer than cousins, this is also a story of picking strawberries, moving rocks, and mending fishing nets fine as lace.

Snowflake Bentley. Illustrated by Mary Azarian. (Houghton, 1998) -- A narrative biography of Wilson A. Bentley who lived in Jericho, Vermont in the 1870s. Sidebars fill in the gaps with statistics and additional information about Bentley and his love of snow.

Washing the Willow Tree Loon. Illustrated by Nancy Carpentar. (Simon, 1995) -- An oil spill off the New England coast threatens the well-being of many animals along the coast. This story concerns itself with the plight of one hapless Loon and the many people who are involved in rescuing the oil soaked bird.

The Water Gift and The Pig of the Pig. Illustrated by Linda S. Wingerter. (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) -- (from the publisher) Radiant, elegantly textured illustrations capture the very heart of this unusual story about a divining rod, a beloved pig, and a quiet girl named Isabel with gifts of her own to uncover. Together, word and image reveal that there is indeed much more to this world than what we see.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Articles

McElmeel, Sharron L. "Author Profile: Jacqueline Briggs Martin." *Library Talk*. Vol. 8, No. 5 (November/December 1995): 19-21.

Jacqueline Briggs Martin Home Page. URL: <<http://www.jacquelinebriggsmartin.com>>