

Braving the Awful Truth

by Dean Nelson

American author Katherine Paterson has made a career of showing life's pain and sadness to her young readers. In her novel *The Same Stuff as Stars*, the main character, an eleven-year-old girl named Angel, is abandoned by her father and mother, although she becomes connected to the bigger story of the universe through her friendship with an astronomer she meets in the woods. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, perhaps Paterson's most famous book, a boy named Jess struggles with guilt, shame, loss, and anger at God for the death of his best friend. In an anthology of essays on her writings called *Bridges for the Young: The Fiction of Katherine Paterson*, editors Joel D. Chaston and M. Sarah Smedman call Paterson a realist, a prophet, and "a disturber of complacency." Paterson's works often have been criticized for their painfully serious themes; some have been banned by school districts and libraries. But Paterson, who has won more than sixty literary awards for her thirty-five books, says she is merely being honest with an audience that deserves her candor.



"I am a writer for children, a person who tries to help make meaning," she says. "But we can't make meaning for anyone, much less the young, unless we first are willing to tell them the truth. My books give kids permission to have real feelings instead of the false feelings people try to impose on them."

Paterson's philosophy stems, at least in part, from her own childhood experiences of not fitting in, or feeling she was different from those around her. Her parents served as missionaries in China, and, as she made sense of the surrounding culture, she often felt herself an outsider. Now in her seventies, Paterson lives in Vermont with her husband, a Presbyterian minister. They have raised four children, two of whom are adopted, and are grandparents to seven. Paterson has the enthusiasm and energy of an elementary schoolteacher, and conversation with her is punctuated frequently by her deep, throaty laughter. But she becomes serious when the subject turns to life's hardships, for which she believes books are a form of preparation.

"Often, people tell me they have given *Bridge to Terabithia* to a child who has suffered some terrible loss," she says. "When they do, I want to say, 'Too late, too late.' The time a child needs a book about life's dark passages is before he or she has had to experience them. We need practice with loss, rehearsal for grieving, just as we need preparation for decision making."

It was a painful personal experience—her own family's brutal confrontation with mortality—that tuned Paterson in to the need for such practice and inspired *Bridge to Terabithia*. When Paterson's son David was eight years old, he was both the class artist and class clown in his elementary school. But when that school closed and the children were transferred to a nearby community school, his gifts and personality were deemed "stupid" and "weird" by his new peers. Life was nearly unbearable until he became friends with Lisa, who loved art and animals and baseball as much as he did. Life was good again. That summer, though, in a freak accident, Lisa was killed by a bolt of lightning. A few months later, David said to his mother after his prayers, "I know why Lisa died. It's because God hates me. It's because I'm bad. God killed her. Probably he's going to kill Mary [his sister] next. Then, he's going to kill you and Dad." Paterson wondered how she could help David understand Lisa's death, when she could not make sense of it herself.

Her commitment to write honestly about the horror of losing a friend is what makes *Bridge to Terabithia* so raw, so powerful, and so believable. The book won the Newbery Medal in 1978, despite criticism that its theme was inappropriate for children. To this assessment, Paterson responds: “Death comes. A lot of children have read it and said, ‘I didn’t know it was OK to be angry.’”

While Paterson draws heavily from life’s harsh realities in her writing and believes that stories help transform chaos to order and meaninglessness to meaning, she resists the notion that there is a *specific* meaning, or moral, to her stories.

“Adults are reluctant to let young people determine their own meaning,” she says. “But writers tell their stories and invite the readers to help create the meaning. There is co-creation at work. A morality tale has a meaning explicit, and it’s the reader’s job to get it. A story invites the reader to make the meaning. And you come to the meaning you need at that time in your life.”

Fourth-grade readers of *Bridge to Terabithia* generally focus on the funny parts and rarely mention the death, she says, while sixth-graders might mention the death, but tend to focus on the friendship between Jess and Leslie. Readers in eighth grade, though, want to talk almost exclusively about the death.

“The imagination of the reader enriches the story,” Paterson says. “But imagination is so wild. You can’t tame it, and that’s what makes people afraid of it. We’re afraid of what we can’t control. Reading allows a person to go off on some tangent, and our tendency is to pull on the leash.”

Unfortunately, it is precisely the activities that demand imagination that are subject to modern society’s budget cuts, she points out. A 2004 study by the Council for Basic Education showed that twenty-five percent of public elementary schools had reduced arts education, and that thirty-three percent anticipated future reductions, in favor of time spent preparing students to take standardized tests. “I know the argument: ‘If our children don’t master the basics, or math or computers or whatever, how will we be able to maintain our position as number one in the world?’” says Paterson. “But we already know what happens when our goal is knowledge for the sake of power: the eugenics and efficient annihilations of an Auschwitz, the firebombing of a Dresden, the instantaneous vaporization of a Hiroshima. Knowledge has not made our world a safer place, much less a better place or a more beautiful place.

“Libraries, art and music programs— you’re not a full human being if this side of you doesn’t flourish,” she continues. “Developing these aspects is important for developing wisdom and judgment. And the wisdom of the ages is in books.”

By inviting readers to step into the shoes of others, books help to foster empathy, a critical component of growth. In his 2002 book, *The Child That Books Built: A Life in Reading*, British essayist Francis Spufford writes that the books we read as children are perhaps the most important ones we will read in our lives. “The words we take into ourselves help to shape us,” he wrote. “They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us, and the related borders of what’s acceptable. ... They build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination.”

As a young person, Paterson’s imagination was stretched by Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, which, although set in South Africa, allowed her to imagine what life might have been like for blacks in America. “I never saw the American South as anything except as a white person until I was forced to walk in the shoes of a black man,” she says. “A child’s sense of justice and morality can be seen in the lives of fictional characters.”

This explains, perhaps, why Paterson so fervently opposes sugarcoated treatments of the world. In her 2001 book of essays, *The Invisible Child*, Paterson writes that children’s authors are often advised: “‘Write nice books ... Write books that will make children virtuous. Avoid controversy. Don’t write books that make children question authority or things as they are.’”

But heeding such advice, in Paterson's view, would not only be useless, but also would do young readers a disservice. "The world our children live in, the one we cannot protect them from, is a world where evil and suffering and injustice are rampant," she says. "It is useless to pretend to children that all is well. A clear but foolish optimism strikes me as almost obscene."

It is the best stories, she believes, that help young readers filter the world and find sense and meaning in it. "Meaning in a story reflects our belief that there is meaning in the universe," she says. "No matter what disorder frames our lives, in the center—in the place that reveals who we are—there is order."

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