

Elizabeth George Speare

Elizabeth George Speare Biography

Elizabeth George Speare is on the list of America's one hundred most popular children's authors, and she has won many awards, including two Newbery Medals, the most prestigious prize given to children's literature. It would not be an exaggeration to say that almost every child in America will read one of her books before graduating from high school. Speare's stellar career as a writer, however, almost didn't happen. Though she wrote a good deal as a child, she stopped for many years and focused her energy and attention on her family. Speare didn't start writing commercially until she was in her forties and her children were in their early teens. Like her most famous work, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, many of her stories are set in New England and focus on young people who are at a critical turning point in their lives.

Facts and Trivia

- Speare grew up in Melrose, Massachusetts. As a young child, she had a cousin who also loved to write. At family gatherings, they would read each other their latest stories. This practice continued throughout their college years.
- Speare's novel *Calico Captive* was inspired by a journal she found written by Susanna Johnson, dated 1807. The diary told the story of the Johnson family's kidnapping by Indians.
- In a famous acceptance speech for one of her Newbery Medals, she said, "I believe that all of us who are concerned with children are committed to the salvaging of love and honor and duty."
- Although Speare often wrote about colonial life in America, her novel *The Bronze Bow* takes place during the time of Jesus.
- Speare died in 1994 of an aortic aneurysm at the age of 85.

Biography

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Elizabeth George Speare was born in Melrose, Massachusetts, on November 21, 1908, and lived in New England her entire life. She had one brother and spent her childhood doing activities that essentially trained her to write *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. With her family, she went hiking through the woods and meadows of New England, many of which have not changed substantially since colonial times. Speare was also exposed to

the arts, particularly plays and concerts, and as a girl she was given the long hours to read freely that Kit remembers so fondly in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. It is little surprise, then, that Speare started writing her own stories at age eight.

She earned a bachelor's degree from Smith College and a master's degree in English from Boston University. She taught high school for several years, and then in 1936, she married Alden Speare. The couple moved to Connecticut and had two children. While the early desire to write that had led her to fill notebooks with poems and stories resurfaced from time to time, Speare devoted these years to her family and didn't start writing seriously until her children were in junior high school. When she did, she wrote about what she knew best—family—starting with articles about family outings and activities.

When she turned her hand to fiction, Speare combined this love for family with her knowledge of younger readers gained as both parent and teacher, her extensive travels around New England, and the historical research on her home region that she did for her own pleasure. Speare published her first novel, *Calico Captive*, in 1957. Like *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, *Calico Captive* is a historical novel written for younger readers, and it also explores the American colonial period through the eyes of a young female protagonist. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* came out the following year, and it won the 1959 Newbery Medal, the most prestigious award for American literature written for children.



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The Bronze Bow, Speare's third book, was published in 1961. Another historical novel with a troubled youthful protagonist, this one set in the time of Jesus, *The Bronze Bow* also won a Newbery (in 1962). A later young adult historical novel, *The Sign of the Beaver* (1983), won numerous awards, including the Christopher Award (given to works that affirm the highest value of the human spirit) and the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. In 1989, Speare was given the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, which honors ongoing contributions to children's literature. This award is all the more striking given Speare's limited output: she published only four novels for children. Speare was known for qualities too often distinct from one another: the quality of her historical research and her ability to make it come alive.

Speare died of an aneurysm in Tucson, Arizona, on November 15, 1994.

Biography

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One of the most critically acclaimed writers of historical fiction for children and young adults, Elizabeth George Speare was born and raised in Melrose, Massachusetts, in 1908. She died on November 15, 1994, at the age of 84.

Speare had a very happy childhood. She recalls, in fact, that it was “exceptionally happy” and that her hometown of Melrose was “an ideal place in which to have grown up, close to fields and woods where we hiked and picnicked, and near to Boston where we frequently had family treats of theaters and concerts.” Her affinity for New England is evident in many of her works. Growing up, Speare also enjoyed the fellowship of her immediate and extended family: supportive and loving parents, one brother, aunts and uncles, and a host of cousins.

From an early age, Speare knew she was a writer. She reportedly began to write at eight years old and composed her first complete stories in high school. After high school, Speare continued her love of literature and writing. She obtained her bachelor’s degree from Smith College in 1930 and then a master’s degree in English from Boston College.

After college, Speare worked as an English teacher for several years at a variety of private schools. In 1936, she met her husband, Alden Speare. The couple moved from Massachusetts, but not from the region, settling in Connecticut. In 1939, son Alden Jr. was born, and daughter Mary joined the family in 1942.

Her life was now full with the responsibilities that accompany being a mother and wife. Speare’s career as a writer simmered, but she always intended to return to writing, her first love. When the children were in junior high school, Speare finally found enough time to pick up the pen again.

It did not take long for Speare to get published. She began to write magazine articles about her family and what it means to be a mother. Some of the magazines that published her work were *Women’s Day*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Parents*, and *American Heritage*.

In 1957, when Speare was forty-nine years old, her first novel, *Calico Captive*, was published. The following year (1958), her second work, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, set during the Salem Witch Trials, was published. It was a stunning success, winning multiple awards. Speare found inspiration for both of these works in the history of New England. Her third novel, *Brother Sam*, is a turn in a geological sense, as it is set in

commercially when it was published in Newbery (1962). Though it would be a success again, *The Sign of the Beaver* 1984. And in 1989, Speare's outstanding Ingalls Wilder Award.

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