Launching young readers!

Reading Rockets

Transcript from an interview with Katherine Paterson

Below is an edited transcript from our interview with Katherine Paterson, divided into the following sections:

Reading for your life

Hi. I'm Katherine Paterson and I am the current National Ambassador for Young Peoples Literature, and I can prove it. I have to flash my medal.

It's been wonderful to be the National Ambassador of Young Peoples Literature. And when I was chosen they said I needed to choose a platform, and the platform I chose was "Read for Your Life." Because I think you read for your own life, for your own enjoyment, for your own information, learning things.

But you also read for the life of your family. I think it is wonderful for families to read aloud together, and it really bothers me that parents stopped reading aloud to their children when they can read for themselves. And that's just about the time, we've learned, that children lose interest in reading for pleasure. So there might be a correlation there.

I think our democracy depends on people who read well, who read deeply, who read widely, who are willing to read things that have been written by people they don't agree with. So in a way you read for the life of your country, the life of your democracy, and you read about other countries. So you lead — you read for the world, in a way, for the whole life of the world.

I think it is a very important thing for us to understand how very important reading is. I went to a middle school this year as Ambassador. And on the library door was a huge sign and it said "Libraries are the second defense of liberty; reading is the first."

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Never too old for read alouds

Well, I have a story about reading aloud in my family, because I used to read aloud to my four children all the time. I said, I did two things right as a mother of four, who all came in just over four years, so I was pretty done in by [laughter] motherhood, in a fast way. When my youngest was a senior in high school and all of her siblings had gone on off to college, and she was very lonely, she was giving me a recitation of all the things I did wrong as a mother, as teenagers are wont to do.

And then she ended it up with, "And besides, you never read aloud to me anymore!" And I thought, Mary, I gave her a copy of *War and Peace* because she was one of my children who at 17 could understand *War and Peace*. And she wants me to read aloud to her still. It is a sign of, of wonderful love and affection to read aloud to someone, and we love it. So, we should never stop reading aloud.

And I think we should read aloud even after our children grow up, and we read aloud to our husbands and have them read aloud to us. Families don't do that anymore. They used to. And when Harry Potter came out, a lot of families started reading aloud together, so I hope this is something that we will really think about and do.

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An advocate for libraries

I'm vice president of — a vice president. Steven Kellogg is the other vice president. Mary Brigid Barrett is our president of the National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance. And our chief aim is to promote libraries because we feel like libraries are in danger when they're most needed. Crazy to de-fund libraries when the economy is terrible because where else can you go?

I mean, in our town you go there to get warm, but also you go there to get books that you couldn't possibly afford to buy, all those wonderful books that are right there waiting for you to read. So we are really concerned about libraries, both in schools and train librarians in schools to help children find the right books. And we're also concerned that children have access to books, that they learn to read well and widely, and become lifetime readers.

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The Exquisite Corpse Adventure

The NCBLA, with the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, decided to do something that would bring children and young people to the read.gov website. And also would be a place where teachers, by using the bait of a crazy story, teach a multitude of things, from brain games to art history. And also, Maria Salvadore, who you may or may not know, contributed a wonderful annotated list of books that would lead children into the wild and wonderful world of books.

So it does a great deal more than just have a crazy story, but it does, at the base, have a very crazy story. Which is a game, really. One writer would write a chapter and pass it on to the next writer to write the second chapter, and you would get the chapter from the previous writer, and you would think, "Oh, my word! What do I do now?" And then, of course, you would build it up to a climax that the next writer would say, "Oh, my word! What do I do now?" [Laughter] But it was a lot of fun. We enjoyed it.

I haven't read the print version. The book has just come out of *The Exquisite Corpse*. And since you had to wait two weeks to find out what happened next when it was online, and all you have to do is turn the page to find out what happens next with the book, I will be interested to see if there's as much interest in the book as there was in the online version. It will be fun to see.

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The Flint Heart re-imagined

Some years ago, my husband John found out that Margaret Mahy, one of his favorite writers, had said that *The Flint Heart* was the book that she most wanted children in the 21st century to be able to read. And since he was a great admirer of Margaret's and he'd never heard of *The Flint Heart*, he went on a quest to find this book.

Now, you have to understand that my husband John thinks he's going to outlive computers, that they're just a passing fad. So he went to his local bookstore and said can you find this book for me, and they did find it. And we got this old sort of buff-colored book with an art deco engraving on the front, and he began to read this story, and he just loved it.

But you have to realize that John should have been a Victorian or at least an Edwardian, and he gave it to me to read, and I said, "It's wonderful, but it's very old fashioned." But John wasn't going to be discouraged by that. He began sending it out to various publishers saying, "Don't you want to republish this book? It's such a wonderful story!" And they all said no. And he sent it to four or five publishers.

And he and our son John had done a book for Candlewick, so he sent it to Karen Lotsby [ph.] at Candlewick, because he knew Karen had a lot of good taste. So Karen loved it too, but she said we can't publish it the way it is; what can we do to preserve this story? So he thought, and I think the thinking took more than the actual doing, trying to figure out how to preserve this wonderful story for another hundred years of reading. But, and make it accessible to modern readers.

So we had to take out a lot. We called it a free abridgement. We removed a lot of things like the political jokes of early 20th century in England, which we figured American readers would probably not understand. And then there were page after page of the varieties of theories that lived on Dartmoor at that time, just lists. There was a — descriptions of flora and fauna that went on interminably. And then Eden Phillpotts [ver.] actually liked to hear himself talk, obviously, so there was a lot of Eden Phillpotts enjoying himself, and we enjoyed him to but we thought maybe enough was enough.

So we just — John would read a chapter, and he would decide what was essential to the story in the chapter and what was not essential. And then I would go upstairs to my little study and rewrite accordingly. And a few things we had to add because Eden forgot to put in motivation in a couple of places, or he seemed to contradict himself every now and then. But mostly it is Eden Phillpotts language. It's certainly all of his characters and the story is his, so we have to give him a lot of credit.

In fact, when I got the book and his name wasn't on the cover, I immediately emailed the publisher and I said, "Where's Eden's name?" Well, it is on the title page, but not on the cover. I guess the publisher thinks our names are better known that Eden Phillpotts' name.

People might wonder what appeals to modern readers, because it is a — really an early 20th century story. It was published in 1910 originally. It's just a wonderful story. And it's — no, it's not Katherine Paterson; it's Eden Phillpotts. It's his wonderful whimsy. It's his wonderful language. We've tried to preserve as much of his language as possible, and when we had to do something else, we tried to imitate his language.

So the parts that really are made up are as close as we can imitate Eden Phillpotts as possible because we wanted it to be a single voice of the narrator coming through. Although the publisher suggested that since there were two of us doing it, we should say 'we' instead of 'I' where Phillpotts says 'I,' so that was one change we made in the narration. But we really did try to preserve as much of what he did as possible.

We hoped that even the steeliest flint heart will respond to this story. Because it's a very warm story, and it's, it's a wise story. The character, The Zagabog, who is the all-knowing Zagabog, and yet so humble and so beautiful. He's a wonderful, wonderful character. And I think he and Unity [ph.] probably are the two characters that will touch your heart. Unity is the five year old who begins with every sentence with, "I wonder." And she is just a child full of wonder and curiosity. And she and the Zagabog become very dear friends.

And in the end when the, the evil flint heart has to be carried to be destroyed, the Zagabog says to entrust the flint heart to Unity because she's the, he knows she is the only one whose heart will not turn hard carrying the flint heart.

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Finding a fresh voice for *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*

My sister Ann said that I had struck a blow for the printed book this year because I published two absolutely gorgeous books. We've just talked about *The Flint Heart*. The illustrator John Rocco has done an unbelievably beautiful job with that book. But earlier in the year, my name is on the cover of a book called *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*.

And I came to do this because Christopher Francis Kelly, who is a friend and longtime — with my publisher a long time ago, sent me some examples of the work of a cut paper artist named Pamela Dalton. And he met Pamela. He saw some of her work in a health food store, asked who had done this beautiful — I can't do the German word, I'm sorry. But it's when you cut with scissors, and then you — what Pam does is she cuts out the design with Xacto knives. She says she uses a blade every half hour. And then she dyes it with coffee. And then she paints it with watercolors and pastes it on a black background.

When Christopher saw the work, he was astounded. He knocked on Pamela's door and said would you like to do a book? And she said, yes, and she would love to do a book using St. Francis of Assisi. So Christopher asked me if I would be willing to write, rewrite — I seem to be only rewriting this year — rewrite for modern reasons the hymn to creation, Brother Sun, Sister Moon.

And it was a wonderful exercise for me as well to read St. Francis' ancient words and try to make them my own. I really, really loved, loved what happened to me as I was doing that.

The impact on me of taking somebody else's words and trying to reframe them, first of all, I'm very humble because I know the two writers that I reworked this year are, are wonderful writers. And so you approach it with a sense of humility: how dare I, in a sense, do this? And yet you're eager to make those words so much a part of yourself that when they come out they're fresh.

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Hope and resilience in *The Day of the Pelican*

My last novel was *The Day of the Pelican*, which I wrote because our church had sponsored refugees from Kosovo. And I began to delve into the history of that tiny country, smaller than the State of Vermont, if you can believe it, but whose bloody history goes back many, many, many, many, many, many years.

And you look at it and you read it and you think, 'There are no good guys. Who are the good guys here?' [Laughter] But the, the terrible suffering that the Albanian Kosovars went through under Serbian oppression. And many had to flee. Their homes were destroyed, many were massacred. And this family came to our church. And then you have the adjustment of living in a new land. And they were Muslim. They went through 9/11.

So they thought they had left prejudice and oppression behind, and suddenly they find that they're considered the enemy by some in this new country. So it's a hard story. I hope it's not a story that is without hope. I think, I think it does show hope and resilience and also shows the strength of family. This family hung together through all kinds of terrible things and triumphed.

And beyond the family there is the community, the caring community eventually of the people that welcome them to Vermont. The Christian Church, because they're very suspicious of Christians, because it was the Christians who persecuted them in their native land. And then gradually the school community begins to accept them and to care for them.

People will ask me about it, hope in children's books. And they say, "Well, don't you have to have hope if it's a children's book?" And I think, if you write a book and then tack hope on the end there's something really wrong with that. You write out of yourself. If you're a person of hope, then there's going to be hope in your book. If you have no hope as a person, then probably [laughter] that will be reflected in your book. The book is who the author is, for better or for worse.

And I'm not always proud of what comes out in my books, but I know it's who I am. At an almost subconscious level, it comes out. So if you're a person of hope, then the book will have hope. Even if things look very dreary and hopeless in the course of the story.

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Universal stories run deep

It is sort of an amazing feeling to know that your books are being read all over the world. I got in the fan mail pack the other day a picture from Syria, if you will believe it, of all these children reading my books. And I thought, "Oh, my goodness. In the middle of what's going on in Syria, here are these kids reading my books and writing to me to tell me how much they loved my books.' How can you explain that? I mean, it's a miracle to me.

It's a miracle to me that any reader loves what's so close to your own heart. I know when I wrote *Bridge to Terabithia*, I thought nobody is going to understand this book who is not named Paterson. But somehow I have realized over the years that if you write from the deepest part of yourself, the reader will respond from the deepest part of herself or himself. And it's, it's a miracle. And that the best thing about being a writer, is that — having a reader who responds in this way.

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Read, listen, learn

People want me to give advice. I never even gave advice to my own children. I don't know how I can give advice to all the children of the world! Except read! [Laughter] I think that's good advice: read, read, read! And be open to people whose ideas might be different from your own. Try to learn from people. Listen to people.

I've had some experiences of being on committees of very strong-minded people, and have just been amazed at how people who are really intelligent and well-read can listen to each other and learn from each other, and have their minds changed if the argument is strong enough. And I think that's what we need in this country desperately right now.

And I think reading helps you get there, because you're reading all kinds of things, all kinds of ideas. You're having to test your own ideas and maybe change your minds sometimes.

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Feeling history through fiction

I've written a lot of historical fiction. I don't get a lot of credit for historical fiction except in certain places. I did two books of historical fiction that are going to have big birthdays next year. I did *Lyddie*, which is the story of a young woman who goes from Vermont to work in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. When I started that book, I had just moved to Vermont. I didn't know anything about Vermont history, and I knew less than nothing about the industrial revolution in Massachusetts. So I started knowing nothing. And I had to learn from the ground up.

And I did a lot of reading, and there are wonderful letters that the mill girls wrote back to their families telling about their lives in the mills. There are newspapers that they published. There are some books written about it, but the words of the girls themselves were the things that really thrilled me and got me interested in the story.

Then of course I went to Lowell, and they have a wonderful park there and its Tsongas Educational Center wrote to me this year and said we're having a big celebration next year, would you please come and talk about Lyddie, because Lyddie to my thrill is one of the books that they use when they're taking children through tours of the mill. They say, well, first question we ask a group of school children is, "Have you read Lyddie? And if you've read Lyddie, then you will know."

And they even had a program, "A Day in the Life of Lyddie," and children would come and they would have a boardinghouse meal, they would go to the weaving floor, they — you know, just going through the day that Lyddie would have experienced in the 1840s. So, you know, I love the fact that I knew nothing when I started, and yet the people who know the most think my book is valuable. Isn't that great? [Laughter] I can't believe it.

Well, teachers use *Lyddie* all the time. I had no idea that there were so few books on the Industrial Revolution when I published it. I wrote it because I was so thrilled with the idea of those Vermont farm girls going to Lowell. I had no idea that it was going to become a very popular classroom book. But teachers tell me over and over again how important it is for them, usually at the middle school level, to have the kids read that, and they get a picture of what it was like to work in those factories, so that the words in the history book come alive for them.

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Bread and Roses

Lowell, Massachusetts, is celebrating in 2012 the hundredth anniversary of the Bread and Roses strike. And so there's going to be a citywide read of *Bread and Roses, Too*. There again, I didn't know anything about the Bread and Roses strike when I started. I began writing that book because there's a picture in our library in Barre, Vermont of the children from the Lawrence strike who came to be taken care of in Barre, Vermont during the strike. And I thought there's a story behind that picture, and I began to work with the picture, and then I began to read all of the newspapers of the period, and then I began to… There was no single book on that strike, which is very hard to believe.

The same year *Bread and Roses, Too* was published, a non-fiction book called *Bread and Roses* was published. Now, if that book had been published two years earlier, it would have been such a help to me because it is a wonderful, wonderful book about the strike. But it is the only single book about the whole strike that I know of. There are chapters in other books. But this is probably the most important labor strike in American history. And one of the most successful because the strikers got everything they asked for. They should have asked for a lot more, but they got everything they asked for in that strike.

So what can fiction do that — what could *Bread and Roses, Too* that *Bread and Roses* hadn't done? Well, it introduces it to young people, for one thing, in a way that a non-fiction book written for adults does not. It gets them involved with the actual, with an actual person. A fictional person, persons, to be sure, a boy and a girl are the chief characters in that book. You care about these people.

And I've often said that what you, you need books about countries all over the world so you'll have a friend in that country, and you have a friend in that century, or a friend in that time that sort of helps you feel what it must have been like in that time. Non-fiction is more often from the outside because a good non-fiction writer is not going to say what people said unless it's actually written somewhere and you know that's what they said. And he's not going to say how people felt because he can't, we can't, be sure how somebody feels in a situation.

But the novelist is free. She can put feelings. She can put feelings and words into character, into fictional characters. And that's how we, how we feel into history, as it were.

I had a very strange experience once. My first three novels were historical novels set in Japan. And a man, grown man, said to me — he'd read the *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, which was my first novel, and he said, "It was the strangest thing. I knew, somehow, how a Japanese boy in the 12th century felt." And I thought, the feelings in that book were written by a middle-aged white woman [laughter] in the 20th century. But the fact that he had, he thought he felt like a 12th century Japanese boy was a compliment to the writer [laughter] at any rate, because that's what you want the reader to experience.

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An excerpt from *The Flint Heart*

Hi, I'm Katherine Paterson and I'm reading aloud from The Flint Heart, which my husband and I abridged from Eden Phillpott's 1910 fantasy. This is a scene where Charles, one of the main characters, first meets the pixie.

"After this there was a long silence and Charles, who had a kind heart and liked to talk of things that he knew interested people, asked the pixie about the book he was reading because he thought the Pixie would be pleased to talk about it. 'The work I am perusing happens to be a dictionary,' answered the fairy. 'There is much pleasure and profit to be won from the pages of a dictionary. I've read and studied every letter of the alphabet. All but 'z.' You may have observed that I never use any word beginning with that letter. The reason is that I have not yet studied it."

"I know two words beginning with 'z,' said Charles. 'You surprise me. I should not have expected that. What are they?' 'Zebra and zany,' answered Charles. 'Thank you. I've met the zebra within works of natural history,' said D'Quincy. 'But zany is unfamiliar to me. What do you mean by it?' 'A chap who plays the clown, who's foolish.' 'Capital,' said the fairy. 'I'm tired of calling the other fairies fools. Now I can call them zanies instead. It will make a nice change.'"

"I thought all fairies were sharp as needles," said Charles, quite surprised by the idea of foolish fairies. 'Far from it. Society of all ranks consists mostly of fools. We people of brains, I include you because you know two words beginning with 'z,' we clever people have to think for those who can't think for themselves.' 'How lucky I am,' said Charles, 'to have met such a wonderful clever pixie. For if most of them are thickheaded, they couldn't have helped me. Now I'll tell you why I've come.'"

"Then he told D'Quincy about his father and how he had changed and how all the children, except John and including Ship, had held a meeting to decide what to do. 'After we decided on a present, the question was what should it be. Unity, our little sister who is five, suggested I should come and ask the pixies, and here I am.' D'Quincy thought for a few moments. He didn't have the slightest idea what kind of present the Jago children should get for Billy Jago, but he pretended that he knew all about it."

"The problem is not difficult of solution. Many far more profound cases than this have come under my notice, and I've never had anybody find fault with my decision. But it happens that next Tuesday evening the Zagabog, a 'z' by the way, visits us. It will be a pleasant evening with music, recitation, dancing and a dinner of 38 courses, dessert ices and the best of wines.' 'That's all very interesting,' said Charles, 'but I'm afraid it won't help me.' 'It may or may not,' said D'Quincy. That rests with you. The Zababog, of course, knows everything. I suppose you are aware of that?' 'I've never heard of him.' 'And never heard of his agent in advance, the Snick?' 'Never.' 'Then I withdraw what I said about your being a clever person,' said the fairy. 'I'm very sorry,' said Charles, 'but it was no good pretending that I did if I didn't.' 'Not a bit,' D'Quincy agreed. 'The Zagabog is usually the best, most brilliant, and the wisest creature of the universe. What he doesn't know doesn't matter."

"Now, I'll tell you what I can do. Our leading statesmen, philosophers, and men of letters have each received permission to bring one guest to the banquet. You may come as my guest, and I have little or no doubt that the Zababog, if I make a favor of it with the Snick, will answer your question.' 'That is very kind I'm sure. I don't know how to thank you Dear Mister Quincy,' said Charles. 'You may have it in your power to do me a service on some future occasion,' said the fairy. 'It is not probable because we move in very different walks of life, but the world is full of possibilities, so who knows. We should expect you then at 8:15 because the king will arrive at 8:30. Be punctual, for the king is the soul of punctuality. It is his only strong point, between ourselves.'"

"I will be there, but it seems almost too much to have dinner with the king and the Zagabog and the Snick, and you.' 'It is dazzling, no doubt, and

a great experience for a human boy,' agreed D'Quincy. 'You must not, of course, expect to be the guest of the evening. The Zababog is the lion of the occasion. You will come merely as my friend, but I may tell you that any friend of mine will have a certain amount of attention paid to him.' 'I hope not,' said the boy. 'I only want to sit in a corner and see it all. Or I might help with the dishes.' D'Quincy was much annoyed by this."

"You must come in the spirit of a guest, not in the spirit of a footman,' he said. 'You must be a grand and haughty as you know how, out of compliment to me. I need hardly to say we dress for dinner.' 'Of course,' said Charles, 'so do I.' 'Indeed? Forgive me, but I should hardly have expected that you did.' 'Always,' said Charles, 'and also for breakfast and supper.' D'Quincy was quite impressed. He had always felt that dressing for dinner was a matter of pure convention. 'Why dress for dinner if you don't dress for breakfast.' 'Why, indeed,' said Charles. 'There is an explanation, I hope,' said the fairy. 'During the course of the banquet that you will take occasion to mention pretty loudly how you always dress for breakfast.' 'Certainly, if you wish it,' said Charles. 'It will show that you possess the precious gift of originality and may add to your importance.'"

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An excerpt from *The Exquisite Corpse Adventure*

I'm Katherine Paterson and I'm reading from *The Exquisite Corpse Adventure*, which is a progressive story game played by 20 celebrated authors and illustrators. And I'm reading from a chapter which I wrote, which is called "The Lost Clue."

"'Do?' said an ominous yet familiar voice outside their berth. 'There's nothing you can do, kiddies, it is exactly 47 ticks of the clock. This train will come to the final bridge and I do mean final.' 'Boppo?' Joe stuck his head out between the curtains to see the painted face and bright red nose they thought they'd left far behind. 'What are you doing on this train?' Boppo laughed. It was an evil unclownlike sound that sent shivers down our hero's spinal columns. 'Do you think you could run away so easily? But no time to chat. I have to detrain before D train demolishes.' And with that Boppo raced away in the direction of the caboose. 'Pull the emergency cord, Nancy!' cried Joe as he leapt from the berth and gave chanced."

"Nancy yanked the red handle above the berth. Almost immediately the great train shuddered and squawked to a stop. In the distance she could hear it, a gigantic explosion. She pushed her way down the aisle, which was quickly filling with passengers who were furious at being so rudely awakened. She found Joe staring off the back of the train. Boppo was long gone."

"'Nancy, we've got to get off this train, now, while it's stopped.' 'And not warn the police about Boppo?' Nancy was horrified. 'No,' she said. First we need to make an anonymous tip, 'if onl

"Let us remember: one book, one pen, one child, and one teacher can change the world." —

Malala Yousafzei