

Author Spotlight

with

Caroline McAlister



Have you always wanted to be a writer? What made you want to write for children rather than for adults?

Yes, I have always wanted to be a writer, but I got sidetracked with my academic career. On my website I have a picture of the table of contents page for a book of stories I planned to publish when I was six or seven. I also spent a lot of time planning dedication pages and choosing names for my imaginary daughters to whom I was dedicating my books. When I had my own children and began reading to them, I remembered why I had always loved books (something I had forgotten in graduate school). I loved seeing my kids' reactions. I also loved the combination of words and art. I knew that then I wanted to create beautiful picture books. I never met any children's authors when I was growing up, though. Children's authors didn't visit schools then, or at least not the schools I attended. If I had met some, I might have started this kind of writing earlier.

When did you first learn about the legend of Duke Cosimo and his beloved jasmine plant? What made you want to base a children's book on it?

I wanted to write a picture book based on folklore about a flower because I liked the idea of floral illustrations. I collected folklore on various flowers for a couple of years. It all came together with jasmine because I had a personal connection with the plant. A jasmine vine grew on the back side of the house I grew up in, and I had very visceral memories of its blooms and perfume. It was a star jasmine with white flowers and dark leaves. It blossomed every spring, and the scent of those blooms stayed with me.

You first book, *Holy Molé*, is set in Mexico, and *Brave Donatella and the Jasmine Thief* is set in Italy. Have you been to either of these places? Do you like to travel?

I love to travel, although I haven't done so much of it since having kids. I also love to study languages. I went to Mexico with a tennis team from my home town of Sacramento when I was seventeen. I got to spend a week living with a family in Guadalajara, and I studied Spanish in high school and college. I went to Florence with my family when I was twelve and my father was on sabbatical. The Uffizi gallery, which is in the old Medici Palace, before Cosimo bought the Pitti Palace, made a big impression on me. I lost my gloves there, and a guard let me in after closing and helped me find them. There was something thrilling about being in the museum after all the people had left.

Aside from writing books for children, you are also a college professor. Which do you find more difficult: writing for children, or teaching others how to write for children?

I actually haven't taught much writing for children. I teach more academic writing and freshman composition. I find that writing for children helps me keep the joy in my own writing, and hopefully I pass that joy along to my students. Writing for children has been as much of a challenge as writing scholarly articles on John Milton. I have learned about revision, concision, visual media, and audience from writing picture books, and I use that knowledge in the composition classroom. Conversely all my years of reading and teaching about character and plot, metaphors and similes, language and sentence structure, feed into my writing.

Food plays an important role in both of your books. Do you like to cook?

I do like to cook, but I'm not as good at it as my parents. I grew up in a real foodie household. Both my parents cooked and entertained frequently. They were always collecting cookbooks, trying new recipes, and talking about food. The first thing I learned to make by myself was my Arkansas grandmother's recipe for buttermilk pancakes, and I still make them with my daughters. I believe that hands-on helping in the kitchen and tasting a variety of foods is an important part of early childhood literacy and education. Kids can learn about measurements, chemistry, reading, and following directions from recipes. When my parents, my sister, and I get together, we always talk about what we've been cooking. Tonight I made sweet potato fries, succotash, and peach cobbler.

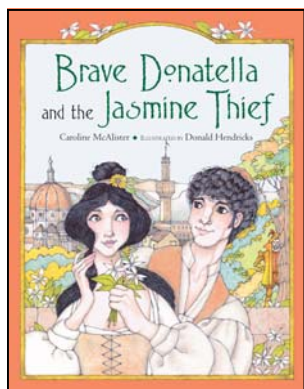
You have mentioned that you have a deep appreciation for hand-made objects, and when you were younger, you often enjoyed to draw. Do you still enjoy drawing? Do you have any plans to illustrate your own books in the future?

I'm afraid I did not develop my drawing skills to the point where I could illustrate a book professionally. I do sometimes have fantasies of illustrating a book with fabric art, quilting, and embroidery, but I think I would need a sabbatical.

Are you working on any other books at the moment?

I am working on a Noah's ark story and a story about Hemingway and his six-toed cat. Also, I am getting up my nerve to write a middle-grade novel.

By Caroline McAlister



Duke Cosimo de' Medici loved beautiful and exotic things, particularly flowers and plants from far-off lands. So when an explorer delivers the magnificent jasmine plant all the way from India as a present to the duke, Cosimo guards it jealously, forbidding anyone to remove even one leaf for themselves. When the foolish gardener Antonio, determined to prove his love for Donatella, clips a sprig of the forbidden jasmine, he is sent to Volterra prison. Now brave Donatella is his only hope for freedom.

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