

## SOMETHING ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ALEXANDER, Martha 1920-

### Personal

Born May 25, 1920, in Augusta, GA; daughter of Guy S. Alexander (an attorney, accountant, and woodworker) and Lillie Mae Camp; married, 1943 (divorced, 1959); children: Kim, Allen. Nationality: American. Education: Graduated from Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts, 1939. Hobbies and other interests: Gardening of all kinds, pottery, and woodworking.

### Addresses

Home: 1519 Nu'uauu Ave., #1, Honolulu, HI 96817.

### Career

Writer and illustrator; Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, HI, art teacher, 1946-49; children's art teacher; freelance artist; frequent lecturer on the creation of books to children, parents, teachers, and librarians.

### Awards, Honors

Outstanding Book citation, New York Times Book Review, 1969, for Blackboard Bear; Best Books citation, School Library Journal, 1970, for Bobo's Dream; Children's Spring Book Festival honor book, 1971, for Sabrina; Children's Book Showcase title, Children's Book Council, 1972, for Nobody Asked Me if I Wanted a Baby Sister; Christopher Award, 1973, for I'll Protect You from the Jungle Beasts; Kentucky Bluegrass Award, 1984, for Move Over, Twerp.

### Writings

SELF-ILLUSTRATED Out! Out! Out!, Dial (New York, NY), 1968.  
Maybe a Monster, Dial (New York, NY), 1968.  
Blackboard Bear (also see below), Dial (New York, NY), 1969, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1999.  
The Story Grandmother Told, Dial (New York, NY), 1969.  
We Never Get to Do Anything, Dial (New York, NY), 1970.  
Bobo's Dream, Dial (New York, NY), 1970.  
Sabrina, Dial (New York, NY), 1970.  
Nobody Asked Me if I Wanted a Baby Sister, Dial (New York, NY), 1971.  
And My Mean Old Mother Will Be Sorry, Blackboard Bear (also see below), Dial (New York, NY), 1972, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 2000.  
No Ducks in Our Bathtub, Dial (New York, NY), 1973.  
I'll Protect You from the Jungle Beasts, Dial (New York, NY), 1973.  
(Compiler) Poems and Prayers for the Very Young, Random House (New York, NY), 1973, included in Santa's Take-Along Library: Five Favorite Read-to Me Books, Random House (New York, NY), 1985.  
I'll Be the Horse If You'll Play with Me (Junior Literary Guild selection), Dial (New York, NY), 1975.  
I Sure Am Glad to See You, Blackboard Bear (also see below), Dial (New York, NY), 1976, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 2001.  
Pigs Say Oink: A First Book of Sounds, Random House (New York, NY), 1978.  
When the New Baby Comes, I'm Moving Out, Dial (New York, NY), 1979, reprinted, Econo-Clad Books (Minneapolis, MN), 1999.  
We're in Big Trouble, Blackboard Bear (also see below), Dial (New York, NY), 1980, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 2001.  
Four Bears in a Box (contains Blackboard Bear; And My Mean Old Mother Will Be Sorry, Blackboard Bear; I Sure Am Glad to See You, Blackboard Bear; and We're in Big Trouble, Blackboard Bear), Dial (New York, NY), 1981.  
Marty McGee's Space Lab, No Girls Allowed, Dial (New York, NY), 1981.  
Move Over, Twerp, Dial (New York, NY), 1981.  
Maggie's Moon, Dial (New York, NY), 1982.

How My Library Grew, by Dinah, H. W. Wilson (New York, NY), 1983.  
Three Magic Flip Books (contains The Magic Hat, The Magic Picture, and The Magic Box; also see below), Dial (New York, NY), 1984.  
Even That Moose Won't Listen to Me, Dial (New York, NY), 1988.  
My Outrageous Friend Charlie, Dial (New York, NY), 1989.  
Where Does the Sky End, Grandpa?, Harcourt (San Diego, CA), 1992. Lily and Willy, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1993.  
Where's Willy?, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1993.  
Willy's Boot, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1993.  
Good Night, Lily, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1993.  
The Magic Hat, Puffin Books (New York, NY), 1994.  
The Magic Picture, Puffin Books (New York, NY), 1994.  
The Magic Box, Puffin Books (New York, NY), 1994.  
A You're Adorable, lyrics and music by Buddy Kaye, Fred Wise, and Sidney Lippman, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1994.  
You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1995.  
I'll Never Share- You, Blackboard Bear, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 2003.

#### ILLUSTRATOR

Charlotte Zolotow, Big Sister and Little Sister, Harper (New York, NY), 1966.  
Janice Udry, Mary Ann's Mud Day, Harper (New York, NY), 1967.  
Lois Wyse, Grandmothers Are to Love, Parents' Magazine Press (New York, NY), 1967.  
Lois Wyse, Grandfathers Are to Love, Parents' Magazine Press (New York, NY), 1967.  
La Verne Johnson, Night Noises, Parents' Magazine Press (New York, NY), 1968.  
Lois Hobart, What Is a Whispery Secret?, Parents' Magazine Press (New York, NY), 1968.  
Doris Orgel, Whose Turtle?, World (Chicago, IL), 1968.  
Lillie D. Chaffin, I Have a Tree, D. White (New York, NY), 1969.  
Louis Untermeyer, You, Golden (New York, NY), 1969.  
Liesel Moak Skorpen, Elizabeth, Harper (New York, NY), 1970.  
Liesel Moak Skorpen, Charles, Harper (New York, NY), 1971.  
Dorothy Frances Canfield Fisher, Understood Betsy, Holt (New York, NY), 1972, new edition with an Afterword by Peggy Parish, Dell (New York, NY), 1987.  
Joan M. Lexau, Emily and the Klunky Baby and the Next Door Dog, Dial (New York, NY), 1972.  
Carol K. Scism, The Wizard of Walnut Street, Dial (New York, NY), 1973.  
Jean Van Leeuwen, Too Hot for Ice Cream, Dial (New York, NY), 1974.  
Liesel Moak Skorpen, Mandy's Grandmother (Junior Literary Guild

selection), Dial (New York, NY), 1975.

Amy Ehrlich, *The Everyday Train*, Dial (New York, NY), 1977.

Barbara Williams, *Jeremy Isn't Hungry*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1978.

Judy Malloy, *Bad Thad*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1980.

## OTHER

Contributor of reviews to *Atlantic*. Some of Alexander's books have been translated into other languages, including French, Japanese, Spanish, and Dutch.

## Adaptations

A set of four filmstrips with cassettes based on the "Blackboard Bear" series, containing *Blackboard Bear, And My Mean Old Mother Will Be Sorry, Blackboard Bear, I Sure Am Glad to See You, Blackboard Bear, and We're in Big Trouble, Blackboard Bear*, was produced by Spoken Arts, 1984.

## Sidelights

Author and illustrator of the ever-popular "Blackboard Bear" series, Martha Alexander is known for her soft pencil and watercolor illustrations and her simple texts, both of which regale young readers with the magic, delights, and frustrations of childhood. Alexander has been an artist since childhood, trying her hand at ceramics, doll making, fabric and clothing design, portrait painting, children's murals and paintings, decorative collages and mosaics, and teaching art to adults and children. Alexander says she did not find her niche in the art world until, at the age of forty-five, she was given her first children's book to illustrate. She knew then that her long search for the right medium of expression had been more than justified. "I felt for the first time that here it was," Alexander said in *Junior Literary Guild*. "It was as though I had searched all my life to find me-or home." As Alexander went on to produce an impressive selection of picture books, her unique ability to make pictures tell the story and her insightful outlook on children combined to win her popular and critical acclaim.

Alexander was born in Georgia, but her family moved to Ohio when she was nine. Besides being shy and insecure by nature, she was sensitive about her Southern accent and a heritage that included slave owning. Her books would later reflect her first-hand knowledge of some of childhood's uncertainties. Alexander's interest in art and her teachers' encouragement about her drawing provided her with a solid foundation during her school years.

After graduating from high school, Alexander entered the Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts. Despite her aspirations to be a portrait painter, she

soon found herself drawn into the world of modern art and "art for art's sake" by teachers and fellow-students. Her husband, an artist she met and married while at the academy, also influenced her. "Being married to a serious painter who, I believed, felt a certain disdain for anything other than 'fine arts,'" Alexander once commented, "I found it hard to find my way to a world of my own." The couple moved to Hawaii where, as they raised their two children, Alexander taught art classes and began to sell her paintings, murals, and collages to architects and decorators.

In 1960, after her marriage dissolved, Alexander moved to New York with her two teenaged children and began illustrating for magazines on a freelance basis. She once described this pivotal stage of her career: "After working for about five years freelancing for magazines and a bit in advertising, I felt extremely discouraged and frustrated and I was having a hard time making ends meet. One day I took the day off and did a whole series of drawings of children doing nonsensical things. I had such fun. I put them aside and went back to the grind until several weeks later I came across the drawings and decided 'if I'm going to be poor, I'll be poor doing what I want to do.' I put them together in a little book and went to Harper and Row." At the large publishing company, Alexander was almost immediately given a book to illustrate. With several more books closely following the first, Alexander's career as a children's book illustrator was established.

Alexander's training in the fine arts was invaluable to her in her new medium. While in art school, she was influenced greatly by three artists—modern Swiss painter Paul Klee, fifteenth-century Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci, and twentieth-century French painter Marc Chagall. The beauty of these artists' works impressed her, but she was particularly intrigued by the playfulness of Chagall and Klee and their ability to say so much without words. Alexander remarked in an autobiographical sketch in *Books for Schools and Libraries*: "By viewing their work I discovered how complete stories can be told through images . . . It was interesting to see that pictures themselves can enhance a story in ways that words cannot. Now I take great pride in telling as much of the story as I can without text, but rather through gestures and expressions."

As she illustrated books for other authors, Alexander came up with ideas for books of her own. She once commented, "As I was working on my first book at Harper, I began to get ideas for books and told them to my editors, although I had no thought of writing them. My editors suggested I write them and my response was 'But I'm not a writer!' She chuckled and said, 'How do you know if you don't try?' My first efforts were very frustrating."

Alexander's first publication as author and illustrator, *Out! Out! Out!*, was a wordless picture book, revealing not only Alexander's belief that pictures can tell a story without words but also her initial insecurity as a writer. Alexander once stated that after making many efforts to write her own stories, "it seemed quite hopeless . . . they sounded good in my head but not on paper." She resolved her frustrations as a writer by developing a system of creating books that did not require her to separate the functions of writing and illustrating. Starting with a "dummy"-a book made up of thirty-two bound blank pages-she wrote her story with words and pictures simultaneously. "I found that as I worked on a dummy, words and pictures began to come together as one, and I was hardly aware of the difference between them," she explained.

Alexander's third self-illustrated publication, the popular *Blackboard Bear*, is about a little boy who, rebuffed by the big boys for being too young, goes home and draws a large bear on his blackboard. He then takes his blackboard bear by the leash and parades it in front of the older boys, who long to hold the leash or ride the bear. With his creation of the bear, the little boy has turned the tables: it is his turn to coolly rebuff the big boys. This flight of childhood fantasy is "satisfying poetic justice," Ethel L. Heins observed in *Horn Book*, further summarizing that Alexander "has already shown the ingenuity of her wordless storytelling through pictures in *Out! Out! Out!* Now she proves just as imaginative with the same kind of eloquent drawings accompanied by a minimum of words." A critic in *Books for Keeps*, reviewing a British edition of the book, found that Alexander "builds a variety of needs and coping strategies into a very private, cleverly understated, little book."

The sequels to *Blackboard Bear*-*And My Mean Old Mother Will Be Sorry, Blackboard Bear*, *I Sure Am Glad to See You, Blackboard Bear*, *We're in Big Trouble, Blackboard Bear*, *You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear*, and the 2003 addition to the series, *I'll Never Share You, Blackboard Bear*-have all been very popular with readers and critics alike. The second title in the series, *And My Mean Old Mother Will Be Sorry, Blackboard Bear*, originally published in 1972, was reprinted in 2000 with full-color illustrations that Alexander adapted from her original three-color artwork. In this installment, the boy manages to get bath water all over the floor and honey all over the kitchen. When he sees his mother's anger and frustration, he figures it is time to run away with his favorite bear. Together *Blackboard Bear* and the boy have an evening outing. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*, writing about the year 2000 edition, praised Alexander's revamped artwork, commenting on the "twilight colors" of the backgrounds and the bear's "uncanny two-dimensional quality." *Booklist's* Carolyn Phelan also praised the "memorable"

story for its “welcome new look.”

In *I Sure Am Glad to See You, Blackboard Bear*, the boy gets a name, Little Anthony, and Bear once again helps him out when other children become cruel and selfish. With *We're in Big Trouble, Blackboard Bear*, Bear learns a hard lesson about leaving the possessions of others alone. Anthony's friends accuse Bear of stealing goldfish from the pond, blueberries from the garden, and honey from a windowsill. Anthony, believing Bear to be innocent, defends him, but then Bear confesses. However, Bear makes up for the thefts, making chalk drawings of the stolen goods and then returning them to their rightful owners. Booklist's Ellen Mandel praised Alexander's “understated yet eloquent pictures” in the 2001 edition of *We're in Big Trouble*, and also pointed out that her “spare text conveys an amazing amount of sentiment.”

In 1995, Alexander added a new title to the series with *You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear*. In this outing, Anthony wants to go to the moon. Luckily, Blackboard Bear knows how to build a spaceship. As the two pack their ship with supplies, including sleeping bags, water, and food, Anthony begins to wonder about the monsters that might reside on the moon. Since their ship seems awfully crowded anyway, he sends Bear off on the journey alone. In the end, Bear returns with a star he brought back for Anthony.

Critics found this volume to be just as praiseworthy as the earlier installments. “Alexander's unadorned narrative and her delicate pencil-and-watercolor art complement each other splendidly,” wrote a critic for *Publishers Weekly*, “creating a soothing bedtime tale.” Booklist's Carolyn Phelan had special acclaim for Alexander's artwork, noting that the “sensitive drawings” lend the book a “beguiling quality that will please both parents and young children.” In a review of the British edition, Cliff Moon noted in *School Librarian* that, though the picture book field was inundated with teddy bear books, Alexander's title was “on another plane.” “Quite outstanding,” he concluded. A critic writing in *Books for Keeps* described *You're a Genius* as a “seemingly simple book which offers countless opportunities for making meanings,” and a contributor for *Junior Bookshelf* dubbed the title an “admirable book.”

Interaction with the children in her family has been a great source of inspiration for Alexander's books. The idea for *Blackboard Bear* arose on a visit with her four year-old nephew. “I was utterly fascinated by this child,” she explained. “He lived in the country and had never had any children to play with. He had a fantasy world that was unbelievable. I watched him race around playing cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, elephants, lions,

and other games. Whatever he was playing, he became that part. He told me wild tales of how he once fell into a huge pit and how his brave father rescued him. It was endless. Once he handed me a dozen baby kangaroos to keep for him." Alexander believes that the imaginary worlds children create are very real and important aspects of their lives. "Adults should encourage, explore, and be interested in the fantasy world of the child," she stated in a Publishers Weekly interview with Jill Korey.

Two picture books, *Nobody Asked Me if I Wanted a Baby Sister* and *When the New Baby Comes, I'm Moving Out*, originated when Alexander's two-year-old granddaughter indirectly expressed feelings of sibling rivalry about her new baby sister by telling her mother that the baby wanted to live with her grandmother. After thinking about the unvoiced resentment and jealousy that might be behind the two-year-old's statement, Alexander decided to write a story in which an older brother actually gives his baby sister away. She hoped that by reading about the basic, but often unspoken, resentments of sibling rivalry, her young readers will understand they are not alone in these feelings and will find appropriate ways to resolve them.

Childhood frustration and powerlessness are also themes of *Even That Moose Won't Listen to Me*, a book in which a young girl, Rebecca, tries to tell her family that a moose is eating their garden. Her family, assuming that the moose is a figment of Rebecca's imagination, ignores her warnings. The moose, also ignoring Rebecca, continues to munch on the garden until there is nothing left to munch. When the family finally discovers that their garden has indeed been destroyed and comes to Rebecca for details, she lets them know that she is too busy to discuss it with them. "This book is about small children having power," Alexander stated in Publishers Weekly. "I remember what it felt like in my own childhood when no one would listen to me. Children are so often misunderstood, not believed."

Alexander has also created colorful board books for the very young. One quartet of titles has proved particularly popular, the "Lily and Willy" books, which include *Where's Willy?*, *Willy's Boot*, *Lily and Willy*, and *Good Night, Lily*. This brother and sister pair star in each of the simple stories, playing hide-and-seek, for example, in *Where's Willy*, with the toddler Willy hiding himself inside a paper bag. With *Willy's Boot*, older sister Lily supervises her brother as he puts away his toys and clothes. In *Good Night, Lily*, the two are in bed with their toys and the sister is reading to Willy. When the siblings fall asleep, the story is continued by Willy's teddy and Lily's doll. A reviewer for Publishers Weekly called this quartet of books "understated and alluring." Liza Bliss, writing in *School Library Journal*, praised the "characteristic soft, delicate, and gently realistic style" of Alexander's

artwork. Similar positive words came from Sheryl Lee Saunders in Horn Book Guide, who called the illustrations "endearing."

Critics have applauded the acute identification with children exhibited in Alexander's expressive drawings and humorously human stories. The author and illustrator says that her understanding of the child's world has been inspired by her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and also by her own memories of child-hood. But beyond these influences, Alexander is inspired by her readers, as she stated in *Books for Schools and Libraries*: "I want to give something to the child reading my book. The payoff comes when I receive a letter from one of my young readers, and it's evident that I've reached him or her. This affords me the deepest satisfaction of all. You see, I was once the timid, shy, and very insecure child for whom I am writing now."

Alexander more recently told SATA, "I owe many people a great deal of thanks along the way, especially Ursula Nordstrom, Charlotte Zolotow, Phyllis Fogelman, [and] Amy Ehrlich."

## Biographical and Critical Sources

### BOOKS

Kingman, Lee, and others, *Illustrators of Children's Books 1967-1976*, Horn Book (Boston, MA), 1978.

### PERIODICALS

Booklist, July, 1994, Annie Ayres, review of *A You're Adorable*, p. 1950; October 1, 1994, Isabel Schon, review of *La bota de Lalo, Lola y Lalo*, and *Buenos noches, Lola*, p. 337; May 1, 1995, Carolyn Phelan, review of *You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear*, p. 1578; November 15, 2000, Carolyn Phelan, review of *And My Mean Old Mother Will Be Sorry, Blackboard Bear*, p. 645; December 15, 2001, Ellen Mandel, review of *We're in Big Trouble, Blackboard Bear*, p. 737.

*Books for Keeps*, March 1996, review of *Blackboard Bear*, p. 97; September 1996, review of *You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear*, p.96.

*Books for Schools and Libraries*, Martha Alexander, 1985.

*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, September, 1969; March, 1977; December, 1979; July-August, 1980; December, 1982; April, 1988.

*Horn Book*, August, 1969, Ethel L. Heins, review of *Blackboard Bear*, p. 395; February, 1976; December, 1978; February, 1983; September-October, 1995, Elizabeth S. Watson, review of *You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear*, p. 625; January, 2000, review of *Blackboard Bear*, p. 59.

*Horn Book Guide*, fall, 1993, Sheryl Lee Saunders, review of *Where's Willy?*, *Willy's Boot*, *Lily and Willy*, and *Good Night, Lily*, p. 240.

*Junior Bookshelf*, August 1995, review of *You're a Genius, Blackboard Bear*,

pp. 123-124.

Junior Literary Guild, March 1975; September 1975; September 1978.

Publishers Weekly, February 26, 1988, Jill Korey, biographical sketch of Martha Alexander, p. 117; March 23, 1992, review of *Where Does the Sky End, Grandpa?*, p. 71; April 5, 1993, review of *Where's Willy?*, *Willy's Boot*, *Lily and Willy*, and *Good Night, Lily*, p. 74; April 17, 1995, review of *You're a Genius*, *Blackboard Bear*, p. 57; November 15, 1999, review of *Blackboard Bear*, p. 68; November 6, 2000, "Books with Staying Power," p. 93; December 17, 2001, review of *We're in Big Trouble*, *Blackboard Bear*, p.94. *School Librarian*, August 1995, Cliff Moon, review of *You're a Genius*, *Blackboard Bear*, p. 102.

*School Library Journal*, July, 1992, Martha Topol, review of *Where Does the Sky End, Grandpa?*, p. 56; October, 1993, Liza Bliss, review of *Where's Willy?*, *Willy's Boot*, *Lily and Willy*, and *Goodnight, Lily*, p. 90; June, 1995, Nancy Menaldi-Scanlan, review of *You're a Genius*, *Blackboard Bear*, p. 76.