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Kate McMullan, an Author for All Ages

By Joan Arth and
Naomi Williamson



Kate McMullan is one of those rare writers who have the ability to connect with children from their earliest experiences with books all the way through their late elementary/early middle school years. “I don’t think I chose writing for kids. I think it chose me. Maybe it comes from teaching. When I saw how much my students loved reading certain books, it was very exciting to me to think of entering a world where I might write a book that kids would love. I’ve always felt that great books for kids are really great books for all ages. This is especially true for picture books.”

THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY READING EXPERIENCES

McMullan’s exposure to good literature began early. “Before I was reading, my mom read to me—Winnie the Pooh, Dr. Seuss, the Babar books, lots of poems—A.A. Milne and Edward Lear, fairy tales, *Little Women*—and my dad read me the funny papers. I think these early listening and looking-at-pictures experiences gave me an ear for the written word and an enjoyment of art.” Looking at her work it’s no surprise that Roald Dahl and James Marshall top her list of favorites, especially the George and Martha series and the Fox series.

As a child McMullan never considered writing as a career. “Honestly, in the ‘50s and early ‘60s we girls were encouraged to marry well. I never knew any authors, so I didn’t know it was an option. It wasn’t until an English teacher in high school wrote on my paper that I could become a “professional” author that it dawned on me that maybe I could. When I began trying to write, I read all of Natalie Babbitt’s books. I loved her combination of humor and fantasy. I also read *The Phantom Tollbooth*—just love that book, and so did my students.”

TEACHING THROUGH HUMOR AND PICTURES

McMullan’s picture books, many done collaboratively with her husband Jim, tickle the funny bone of kids while subtly teaching them important things like the alphabet or counting. *I Stink*, for example, features a personified garbage truck on his daily route around the city. What child can resist a loud, belching, boisterous piece of heavy equipment talking about all he “eats” in alphabetical order? McMullan’s alliterative language skills captivate her readers. McMullan says, “I love writing picture book scripts. I’m a very aural writer—I hear the words, the rhythms of words, and I can get carried away with the sounds over the meaning. But working with Jim has helped me become much more visual. A great picture book, like *Where the Wild Things Are*, is a minimalist masterpiece. Each word counts for so much.”

A TRUE PARTNERSHIP

Is it difficult working with a spouse? For McMullan, the answer is no. “Jim and I really love working together. I think it’s partly because we each have a sphere in the process that is our own, so we don’t have much conflict. We seem to truly admire each other’s work, and I think that kind of respect is essential. When we first started collaborating, we had some rocky times. We had to learn to work together and we were motivated to do it, so we did it. I feel incredibly lucky to be able to do books with Jim.”

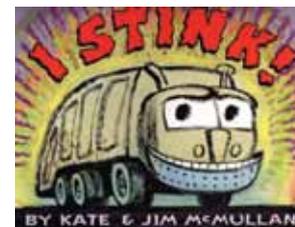
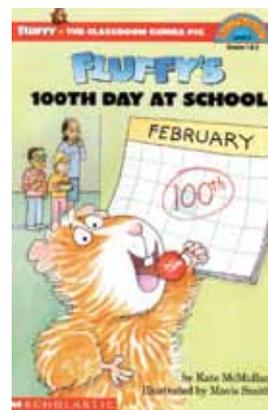
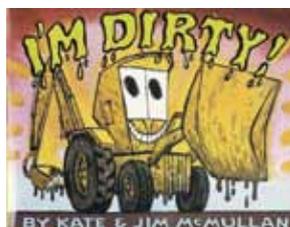
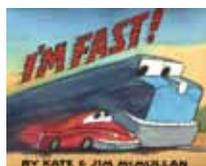
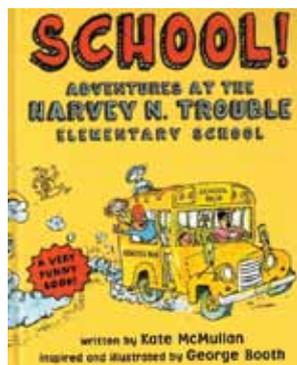
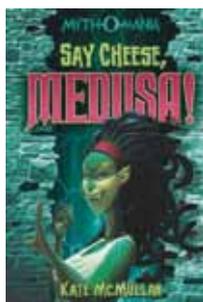


Kate McMullan

PICTURE BOOKS IN TRANSITION

With much press lately about picture books becoming an endangered species, McMullan is quick to point out that parents and educators need to remember the vital role picture books play in our children’s education. “Picture books have complex concepts and vocabulary, and there’s an adult reading the books aloud and available to explain anything a child doesn’t understand. Picture books also contribute to visual literacy. Teachers can use them in the classroom for all ages. Picture books are rich and sophisticated. They have to appeal to both audiences (adult and child), or one of them will slam the book shut.” Unlike many in the industry, McMullan feels that picture books can make the transition to the electronic age. “I think books for young kids will co-exist with iPad books and other electronic books, at least for the near future. The double-page spread is definitely endangered—I think publishers will want artists to use them less so that books can be converted to e-formats smoothly, and that is a big loss, visually.”

“Chapter books! I love writing dialog and creating quirky characters and worlds where a series of stories can take place.”



“I really would love to write a book that would make everyone just sob, but I don’t seem to have it in me. Kids like to laugh. Funny stories keep them coming back for more.”

TITLES FOR EARLY READERS

Kids who cut their teeth on McMullan’s picture books are fortunate to have access to early readers they can tackle on their own. “I love writing easy-to-reads. It is so thrilling to have a beginning reader be able to read one of the ‘Fluffy’ books or a ‘Pearl and Wagner.’ I like being one of the first stepping stones in a young reader’s life, and hope it’s a positive experience so that he or she will become a lifelong reader.” Don’t let the simple text deceive you. McMullan cleverly infuses humor into story lines to which all kids can relate. Things like getting new glasses (*Pearl and Wagner: Four Eyes*), friendship issues (*Pearl and Wagner: Two Good Friends*), or dealing with a class pet guinea pig with an attitude (the Fluffy series) are just a few of the topics covered in these controlled vocabulary readers. “Early readers have a key role to play for a very narrow band of time in a child’s life—that time when reading is a hard struggle until fluency kicks in.”

The American Library Association honors the most distinguished early reader books with the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award. *Pearl and Wagner: One Funny Day* earned a Geisel honor award in 2010. “It’s very nice to have these types of books appreciated by librarians. The Pearl and Wagner series is dear to my heart. Bob Alley’s art is so sweet and funny at the same time. He is a master of body language, no matter whether the body is a human, mouse, or a raccoon!” The award-winning duo has also collaborated on riddle books in the Dial Easy-to-Read series, with *Kitty Riddles* and *Sheepish Riddles*.

MORE HUMOR FOR MIDDLE GRADES

Middle grade literature also showcases McMullan’s versatile writing ability. “Chapter books! I love writing dialog and creating quirky characters and worlds where a series of stories can take place. With *Dragon Slayers’ Academy*, I hear from many parents who read the books with their kids, and they, too, seem to get a kick out of the wacky humor. I also hear from parents of boys, especially that their sons showed no interest in reading until they found the DSA books. That makes me happier than anything. I can remember when I taught fourth grade, the boys who were still struggling with reading would comb the library shelves for the skinniest books they could find—so I wanted to make the DSA books skinny and accessible. Series are great for kids who have a hard time reading. But, if they’re motivated by the characters and stories, they will read, and by the time they finish the series, they’re not struggling anymore.”

McMullan’s Myth-O-Mania books are great to put into the hands of readers who can’t get enough fantasy with humor thrown in. It’s humor that keeps kids clamoring for McMullan’s books. “I really would love to write a book that would make everyone just sob, but I don’t seem to have it in me. Kids like to laugh. Funny stories keep them coming back for more.”

SELECT WORKS

- I’m Fast!* HarperCollins, 2012.
- Bulldog’s Big Day!* Orchard, 2011.
- School! Adventures at the Harvey N. Trouble Elementary School.* Feiwel and Friends, 2010.
- I’m Dirty!* HarperCollins, 2006.
- I’m Mighty!* HarperCollins, 2003.
- I Stink!* HarperCollins, 2002.
- Dragon Slayers’ Academy* (series). Grosset & Dunlap.
- Fluffy the Classroom Guinea Pig* (series). Scholastic.
- Myth-O-Mania* (series). Capstone.
- Pearl & Wagner* (series) Dial.

A complete bibliography of Kate McMullan’s books can be found at www.katemcmullan.com along with additional biographical information and a link to contact her.

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