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**Jacob Have I Loved** by Katherine Paterson

**Summary**

Sara Louise Bradshaw lives on Rass Island on the Chesapeake Bay with her beautiful twin sister Caroline, her parents, grandmother and best friend Call. Sara is strong and proud and often contributes to the family’s income through her hard work. Her sister, on the other hand, is considered artistic and of delicate health, constantly getting more attention from everyone, except Call. When World War II breaks out, Sara gets the opportunity to work as a waterman with her father, but this alone does not fulfill her dreams. Sara will need to face leaving the island before she can find a true place for herself in the world.

244 pages, 5th grade and up

**Discussion questions**

Spoiler alert! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don’t want to know what happens!

- The author chose to open the book with a chapter that describes Rass Island and the life of the watermen. Why do you think she decided to do this? What importance is it to the novel?
- Have you ever spent a considerable amount of time on an island? What was it like? Did you have any of the same feelings that Sara did?
- What was your first impression of Caroline? Did it change at all through the course of the novel? How do you think she sees the family?
- Describe Grandma. What is she like? How do you think she got to be the way she is?
- How does Sara’s relationship with Call change over the course of the novel?
- Why do you think Sara goes through a period of time obsessed with hands? (page 147) What do hands symbolize to you?
- Was Sara in love with the Captain? Why do you think she was having those feelings about him?
- How does Sara react to being called “Wheeze”? How does she react to being called Sara Louise? Which does she prefer?
- What does the title of this book refer to? (page 178). What does it mean?
- Why do you think Sara calls her life fishing with her father the happiest days of her life?
- Do you feel that Call and Caroline betrayed Sara? Why or why not?
- What does Sara’s mother say to her that allows Sara to feel free to leave the island?
- Sara choses to move to a mountain-locked valley to be a nurse-midwife. Why do you think she chose that profession and that location? What does Joesph mean when he says, “‘God in heaven’s been raising you for this valley from the day you were born’?”
- What is the significance of Sara giving life to the newborn twin baby girl? Why do you think the author ended the novel with that story?
Jacob Have I Loved
Reading Guide

This supplementary reading guide is designed to help you understand and remember the assigned class text. It can serve as a kind of pre-reading organizer, giving you hints about what will be important in each chapter as you go along. You may use the questions as guidelines for your reading response, if you don’t have something you’d prefer to write. If you find the reading easy, you do not need to use the guide.

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Jacob Have I Loved is a story about jealousy. The title comes from the Bible story of Jacob and Esau, Isaac’s twin sons. Although Esau was the older son, Jacob was favored by his mother and when Isaac was dying, Jacob disguised himself as his brother and received the blessing meant for the eldest son. Both in the Old Testament story in the Book of Genesis and in the New Testament allusion to that story in Romans, the suggestion is that God, too, favored Jacob and ignored or even hated Esau.

Louise Bradshaw grew up on a small island in the Chesapeake Bay where the Protestant church was very important, as it is on Smith Island today. She knew this story and she could connect it to her own situation as the ordinary, ignored older twin. As a reader, you should keep the story in mind and look for ways that Katherine Paterson has woven it into the book.

“Rass Island”
In this chapter the adult Louise thinks back to the island where she spends her childhood and imagines returning there. As you read, try to visualize this island. What are the specific details she uses to create a sense of this place in the reader’s mind?

Chapter 1
This chapter introduces 3 main characters: Louise, her twin sister Caroline, and McCall Purnell. What are three or four important traits you discover about each of these characters?

Chapter 2
Louise introduces her parents and tells the story of her birth. Who was ignored? Who got all the attention? How did that continue through the Bradshaw twins’ childhood? How is that like the story of Jacob and Esau? (You may want to find that Bible story and find more details.)
Chapter 3
World War II begins for the U.S. with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. **How does Louise feel about that?** Does anyone care how she feels? **How does Louise think her parents feel about her?** How does she want them to show their love?

Chapter 4
Louise and Grandma are alone until her mother and Caroline return on the ferry from the mainland where Caroline has been to the doctor. **Notice who else gets off the ferry. He will be important.** Louise’s consuming jealousy is obvious in this chapter. Find a memory and an event which feed that jealousy.

Chapter 5
Hiram Wallace’s story is told, and Auntie Braxton is introduced. **What is her distinguishing characteristic? What is his?** Call and Louise think he is a German spy. Do you? Does this story seem like one that will be a spy story? Why or why not?

Chapter 6
Louise dreams that her sister is dead and makes plans to make money. **Why?**

Chapter 7
Louise and Call visit the Captain, and Call volunteers to make that regular. **What is Louise jealous about in this chapter?**

Chapter 8
Lyrics Unlimited turns out to be a scam. **How does Louise figure that out?** Auntie Braxton has collapsed and when Hiram Wallace sends Louise to get help he calls her by her full name. Why was that important to her? (She asks this question in the book. What do you think?)

Chapter 9
They try to get rid of Auntie Braxton’s cats. **How does Caroline score again?** At the end of the chapter Louise is reminded of the story of her birth again. **Why?**

Chapter 10
Hurricane. **Who is brave and who is not?**

Chapter 11
Louise pushes the Captain to go see what effect the storm had on his house. **What did they find?** Why do you think she responded so strongly to the hug in the boat?

Chapter 12
Louise cannot seem to control her own imagination and her Grandmother makes her feel worse. The Captain finds another place to live. **Why did Louise get so upset when her sister used her hand lotion?** What did it stand for in her mind?
Chapter 13
The Captain solves his housing problem by marrying Trudy Braxton. Louise decides she’s crazy and thinks this has advantages; **what are they?**

Chapter 14
Trudy Braxton dies. Grandma accuses the Captain of poisoning her and Louise of helping. **Why do you think she says this kind of thing?** Call goes to work for Louise’s father and the Captain offers money for Caroline to go to boarding school in Baltimore. Where does this leave Louise? What does her Grandmother say that makes Louise feel even worse?

Chapter 15
Call goes into the Navy and Louise quits school to work on her father’s boat. **Why does she decide that God hates her?** Do you think this is reasonable or crazy? Notice what Louise says happens to “ordinary, ungifted” female crabs. What is she saying about her own life? Why, then, do you think she is so happy, suddenly.

Chapter 16
The war is over. Call comes home but he is going to marry Caroline. **How does Louise feel about this? Louise’s grandmother is worse than ever. What is she accusing her mother of?**

Chapter 17
Louise is left alone with her grandmother again while her parents go to Caroline’s wedding. **What does she discover that makes her pity her grandmother?** When Hiram Wallace comes for Christmas dinner he asks Louise what she really wants to do. **Why do you think she hasn’t figured this out before?**

Chapter 18
Louise’s parents return. She has a long conversation with her mother about what brought her mother to Rass Island and why she is comfortable there. Her mother, too, tries to convince her to leave. **What has kept her there?**

Chapter 19
Louise goes to the University of Maryland. This is the late 1940s and a time when there aren’t many places in medical schools for women so she transfers to a nurse-midwife school. When she graduates she goes to a mountain village. **Why does she pick Truitt and why does it remind her of the island?**

Chapter 20
Louise is married. Her first son arrives just after her father dies; she doesn’t go home for the funeral. At the end of the chapter (and of the book) she delivers another pair of twins. **How does this delivery differ from her own birth story? What does she do for the weaker twin? How does this show she has changed?**

Many readers have been caught off-guard by the ending of this book. Prepare for your discussion of the book by thinking about why you think this is, or isn’t an appropriate ending. If you like it be prepared to defend it. If you don’t, **how would you have ended Louise’s story?**
Vision of Self in Katherine Paterson’s Jacob Have I Loved
Patricia A. Liddie

Set almost entirely on a fictional Chesapeake Bay island in the mid-to-late 1940s, Jacob Have I Loved chronicles one person’s search for and acceptance of self. Although intended for an audience of young adult readers, Katherine Paterson’s portrayal of this personal journey is so real that it has achieved universal appeal. The beauty of teaching this Newbery Award-winning classic, then, is that the work is as meaningful to teacher as it is to student, to forty-year old as it is to fourteen-year old.

Jacob Have I Loved takes its title from the Biblical story about Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. The relationship between the sons is one of jealousy bordering on violence. Esau, the first born, foolishly gives up his birthright out of physical hunger and later loses his rightful blessings a result of the deceit of his mother and brother. Even God turns against Esau. In Romans 9:13, God says, “Jacob I loved and Esau I hated.” Thus Esau is an extremely bitter person who feels so victimized, so angry, that he is believed capable of murder. Jacob, afraid of his brother, leaves, only to return years later to a reconciliation with Esau, who has remained at home, assuming all of the responsibilities that would have been his anyway had he received the blessing he deserved.

In Jacob Have I Loved, the parallels to the Jacob-and-Esau story are clear. This is the story of Sara Louise Bradshaw and her twin sister, Caroline. Sara Louise, born first, is healthy and strong whereas Caroline is weak and near death, thus becoming the focus of concern and attention from the start.

I was the elder by a few minutes. I always treasured the thought of those minutes. They represented the only time in my life when I was the center of everyone’s attention. From the moment Caroline was born, she snatched it all for herself. (Harper Trophy, 1990, p. 18)
I felt cold all over, as though I was the newborn infant a second time, cast aside and forgotten. (p. 18)

The story always left the other twin, the stronger twin, washed and dressed and lying in a basket. Clean and cold and motherless. (p. 19)

These feelings of resentment, having had their inception at birth, continue throughout Sara Louise’s youth. She is in a futile situation as she strives to define herself in terms of her sister. Even in their teenage years, Sara Louise feels robbed, victimized, and completely unappreciated.
Caroline, on the other hand, with her operatic voice and golden good looks, is smiled on by all, and “Caroline is the kind of person other people sacrifice for as a matter of course” (p. 25).

And sacrifice they do, not only Sara Louise and her parents, but also an island friend who gives Caroline money in order that she may leave the island and attend music school. Thus, Sara Louise, the “Esau figure,” is left behind on the island. Caroline’s leaving is just as well, because, like the elder twin in the Biblical story, Sara Louise finds herself entertaining thoughts of her sibling’s death.

I often dreamed that Caroline was dead. Sometimes I would get word of her death— the ferry had sunk with her and my mother aboard, or more often the taxi had crashed and her lovely body had been consumed in flames. And there were two feelings in the dream -- a wild exultation that now I was free of her and . . .terrible guilt. I once dreamed that I had killed her with my own hands. I had taken the heavy pole with which I guided my skiff. She had come to the shore, begging for a ride. In reply I had raised the pole and beat, beat, beat. In the dream her mouth made the shape of screaming, but no sound came out. The only sound of the dream was my own laughter. I woke up laughing, a strange shuddering kind of laugh that turned at once into sobs. (pp. 74-75)

It is only with Caroline’s departure from Rass Island that Sara Louise can even begin her search for self. That search must begin at home, for thus far in her life she has seen herself in the role of sacrificer. Although bordering on martyrdom, she does truly feel that her father Truitt, a fisherman, needs her help to make up for the absence of young men during this time of war. There is more to her problem than her need to help her father, however. Sara Louise is almost incapable of moving on towards another phase in her life. Indeed, her vision of herself at this point in her life is tied as inextricably to her vision of her surroundings as it is to her vision of Caroline as the favored child. The island of Rass has come to reflect the island that is her soul. Throughout the course of the novel, we see Sara Louise becoming more and more island-like in her relationship to those around her. Ironically, as she sacrifices for others, she withdraws from them. As she attempts to increase their need of her (thus gaining their attention), she more and more tries to deny her need of them. Needing them, she pushes them away, fortifying her walls of defense. “I was a good oyster in those days. Not even the presence at Christmastime of a radiant, grown-up Caroline could get under my shell” (p.190).

Having spent a year with her father, Truitt, helping him support the family, Sara Louise, an Esau-hunter figure fishing the waters of the Chesapeake, is ultimately liberated, not by her Isaac-like father but, rather, by her un-Rebecca-like mother, Susan. No woman of deceit, this mother shares with her daughter her own youthful journey toward and realization of self, and, in so doing, opens her daughter’s eyes to her own choices and potential actions.

And, oh my blessed, she was right. All my dreams of leaving, but ‘neath them I was afraid to go. I had clung to them, to Rass, yes, even to my grandmother, afraid that if I loosened my fingers an iota, I would find myself once more cold and clean in a forgotten basket. “I chose the island,” she said. “I chose to leave my own people and build alive for myself somewhere else. I certainly wouldn’t deny you that same choice. But,” and her eyes held me if her arms did not, “oh, Louise, we will miss you, your father and I.”

I wanted so to believe her. “Will you really?” I asked. “As much as you miss Caroline?”
“More,” she said, reaching up and ever so lightly smoothing my hair with her fingertips.

I did not press her to explain. I was too grateful for that one word that allowed me at last to leave the island and begin to build myself as a soul, separate from the long, long shadow of my twin. (pp. 227-228)

And so Sara Louise’s journey toward enlightenment, toward an understanding of others and an understanding of self, truly begins. Before the novel ends, she has gone through college, graduating as a nurse-midwife. In that capacity, she moves to a poverty-stricken Appalachian mountain town, chosen because its name is Truitt, the same as her father’s. Never far from her past, she has moved from one island existence (Rass) to another (Truitt). Sara Louise herself observes that “A mountain-locked valley is more like an island than anything else I know” (p. 232). It is here in Truitt that she meets and marries her husband and bears her son whom she names Truitt. Thus, as Paterson moves toward the resolution of the Jacob-and-Esau conflict, she introduces the image of the Holy Trinity as a guiding factor in Sara Louise’s life at this point.

As readers, we are certainly aware of her father as Truitt and her son as Truitt; but, if they are to be considered the first two parts of the Trinity, then the town of Truitt must be considered the last, that of the Holy Spirit. An examination of the concept of the Holy Spirit and the novel’s final scenes explains all. The Holy Spirit is that part of the Trinity that is active and enabling: it enables us to see; it causes change and it enlightens; it moves a person from where she is to where she needs to be. The Holy Spirit is responsible for knowledge and wisdom. And it is in the town of Truitt that Sara Louise is enlightened, able to see and finally understand self. It is here that she recognizes, becomes, and accepts self, something that could only happen as a result of understanding her own haunting birth.

Paterson develops this understanding by Sara Louise in the novel’s final chapter, in which she is called to help in the delivery of twins born to a young and impoverished woman named Essie. As the delivery begins, we are reminded of the story of the birth of Caroline and Sara Louise. The circumstances are parallel:

The first twin, a nearly six-pound boy, came fairly easily, despite Essie’s slender frame, but the second did not follow as I thought it should . . . .Before I even cut the cord, I put my mouth down and breathed into her tiny one. (p. 241)

And so in the case of her own birth, the healthier first-born is placed in a basket and given to the grandmother for safekeeping, seemingly forgotten. The weaker of the two, the “Caroline twin,” receives all of Sara Louise’s attention. Warming the baby by the kitchen oven door, Sara Louise is approached by the babies’ father who asks that the weak one be baptized in the event of her death. Sara Louise consents, even though, “I wanted to be left in peace to guard my baby” (p. 242). (Note the use of the possessive pronoun.) She baptizes the child Essie Susan, giving her an identity “. . . in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen” (p. 243). She then proceeds to feed this Essie Susan, this Caroline, with her own breast milk. “I took my baby out of the oven and held her mouth to catch the milk, which began to flow of its own accord” (p. 244).
Embodied in this weaker twin, then, are Caroline, the babies’ mother (Susan), and Sara Louise (Essie-Esau) herself. Through the act of breathing life into the child (“breath” being “spirit”) and then feeding her, Sara Louise does what she has always done for Caroline: she takes part in her nurturing. Even more, however, she is also forgiving her mother. She does this by feeding the child as her mother fed Caroline, thus finally exhibiting an understanding of and acceptance of her mother’s actions during that other delivery so many years before. Of course, most important of all, Sara Louise nourishes self, for the Trinity is complete. She has acquired knowledge and understanding of her own birth and, therefore, reborn, nurtures her new self, that self which not only hears but now can welcome the line of the hymn that Caroline had sung so many years before: “I wonder as I wander out under the sky . . .” (p. 244).

Jacob Have I Loved, like so many of Katherine Paterson’s works, confirms the importance of the individual as set against the backdrop of all humanity. To her youthful audience, the author declares her belief in the one and in the whole and, in so doing, reminds them of their role in the larger scheme of things. This novel is indeed a classic, and the beauty of it is that it’s so readable for and appropriate to the older junior-high student. At a time when vision of self is all-important, ninth graders are relieved to discover that most of us take years to find self and to accept the self that we find, that such acceptance is not an easy passage, and that, very often, the self we find is not the one we expected.

Patricia A. Liddie chairs the English Department at Council Rock Junior High School-Newton in Newton, Pennsylvania.
Katherine Paterson

1932-

Also known as: Katherine Paterson, Katherine Womeldorf Paterson, Katherine Womeldorf

Nationality: American Entry updated: 03/31/2006
Birth Date: October 31, 1932
Place of Birth: Huayin, China

Award(s):
Phoenix Award, Children’s Literature Association, 1974, for Of Nightingales That Weep; National Book Award for Children’s Literature, runner-up for Edgar Allan Poe Award (juvenile division), Mystery Writers of America, both 1977, citation from the Puppeteers of America, 1978, and American Book Award nomination (children’s fiction paperback), 1982, all for The Master Puppeteer; Newbery Medal, and Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, both 1978, Silver Pencil Award (Netherlands), and Janusz Korczak Medal (Poland), both 1981, and Le Grand Prix des Jeunes Lecteurs (France), and Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Award, both 1986, all for Bridge to Terabithia; National Book Award for Children’s Literature, Christopher Award, Newbery Medal Honor Book, Jane Addams Children’s Book Award Honor Book, and CRABbery (Children Raving about Books) Honor Book, all 1979, American Book Award nominee (children’s paperback), 1980, and William Allen White Children’s Book Award, 1981, all for The Great Gilly Hopkins; Newbery Medal, American Book Award nominee (children’s hard cover), and CRABbery Honor Book, all 1981, and American Book Award nominee (children’s paperback), 1982, all for Jacob Have I Loved; Outstanding Books and Best Illustrated Books selection, New York Times, 1981, for The Crane Wife, illustrated by Suekichi Akaba; Parents’ Choice Award, Parents’ Choice Foundation, 1983, for Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom, 1985, for Come Sing, Jimmy Jo, and 1987, for The Tongue-Cut Sparrow; American Bookseller Pick of the Lists, 1988, for Park’s Quest; Best Picture Books selection, Boston Globe-Horn Book, 1991, for The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks; Irma Simonton and James H. Black Award, 1992, for The King’s Equal; International Board of Books for Young People (IBBY) Honor Book, 1994, for Lyddie; Parents’ Choice Story Book Award, and Paperback Book Honor, 1996, and Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction, 1999, all for Jip: His Story; Parents’ Choice Story Book Award, Parents’ Choice Foundation, 1999, for Preacher’s Boy. Many of Paterson’s works were named as notable books by the American Library Association in their respective years of publication. In addition, many of her works have been named best books by children’s literature reviewing sources such as Booklist, English Journal, and School Library Journal and have received many child-selected awards. Paterson has been the recipient of


WRITINGS:

HISTORICAL FICTION; FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS
• *The Master Puppeteer*, illustrated by Haru Wells, Crowell (New York, NY), 1975.
• *Jip: His Story* (companion volume to *Lyddie*), Dutton/Lodestar (New York, NY), 1996.

CONTEMPORARY REALISTIC FICTION; FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

• *Bridge to Terabithia*, illustrated by Donna Diamond, Crowell (New York, NY), 1977.
• *Jacob Have I Loved*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1980.
• *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo*, Dutton/Lodestar (New York, NY), 1985.
• *Park’s Quest*, Dutton/Lodestar (New York, NY), 1988.

“MARVIN” SERIES; BEGINNING READERS

• *The Smallest Cow in the World*, illustrated by Jane Clark Brown, Migrant Education Program (Burlington, VT), 1988.

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

• (Reteller) *The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks* (picture book), illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon, Dutton/Lodestar (New York, NY), 1990.

• *Celia and the Sweet, Sweet Water*, illustrated by Vladimir Vagin, Dutton/ Lodestar (New York, NY), 1998.


**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MATERIALS; FOR CHILDREN**


• *To Make Men Free* (curriculum unit; includes books, records, pamphlets, and a filmstrip), John Knox Press (Richmond, VA), 1973.


**NONFICTION; FOR ADULTS**

• *Gates of Excellence: On Reading and Writing Books for Children* (essays; also see below), Dutton/Lodestar (New York, NY), 1981.

• *The Spying Heart: More Thoughts on Reading and Writing Books for Children* (essays; also see below), Dutton/Lodestar (New York, NY), 1989.


• *A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children* (omnibus; includes *Gates of Excellence* and *The Spying Heart*), Plume (New York, NY), 1995.


**OTHER**

magazine, 1987--. Paterson’s papers have been translated into over twenty-five languages. Her papers are housed permanently in the Kerlan Collection, University of Minnesota.


**“Sidelights”**

A prolific, popular author who is considered among the most accomplished of contemporary writers for the young, Katherine Paterson creates fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults that is credited for reflecting her personal background and Christian beliefs while successfully exploring universal subjects and themes. Paterson has contributed to a variety of genres: contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, picture books, short stories, beginning readers, original folk and fairy tales, retellings, religious education materials, and informational books; in addition, she has produced volumes of essays directed to adults on reading and writing books for children. The winner of two Newbery Medals and two National Book Awards, among other prizes, Paterson has written several books that are considered classics of their genres. She is perhaps best known as the author of *Bridge to Terabithia*, the first of her Newbery winners. In this work, which is directed to middle graders, Paterson describes how the life of Jess, a ten-year-old boy, is transformed by his friendship with Leslie, a girl who moves to his rural Virginia town. *Bridge to Terabithia* often is credited for its sensitive, insightful depiction of the relationship between Jess and Leslie, her accidental death, and Jess’s personal growth.

Paterson sets her books in a variety of locales and time periods, including Japan in the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, China in the nineteenth century, and the American South and East Coast in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Her stories characteristically feature young protagonists, both male and female, who are orphaned, isolated, or estranged from their families. Caught at emotional crossroads, these characters embark on quests to find their parents, to escape their circumstances, or to find themselves. Through their experiences, most of
which are extremely difficult, the boys and girls become enlightened: they learn to rise above disappointment, to accept reality, to become less self-absorbed, and to move forward. In the process, they develop greater strength of character, find new balance, and begin to give of themselves to others. Paterson includes tough issues in her works, such as death, guilt, jealousy, racism, poverty, suicide, mental illness, and child abuse. However, she underscores her books with healing, hope, and redemption, aspects that, along with the author’s understanding of the young and her realistic, straightforward depiction of her protagonists and their moral choices, are credited with keeping her books from being placed in the category of “problem novels.” Many of Paterson’s works reflect her wry sense of humor and love of wordplay as well as the wit of her characters.

As a writer, Paterson favors a clear, understated prose style, often in third person, that is noted for its power, eloquence, and rich imagery. Writing in Twentieth-Century Children’s Writers, M. Sarah Spedman provided this description: “Always Paterson’s language aches and shimmers. It mesmerizes as it tells.” Several of the author’s novels draw on mythology and the metaphysical, such as the Bible and the quest for the Holy Grail, and include literary allusions as well as references to popular culture, cooking, and nature, among other subjects. Paterson’s works reflect her appreciation for literature and music. She also underscores her books with social commentary, and often is acknowledged for her sympathy for the downtrodden as well as for her inclusion of feminist themes. Paterson has been criticized by some groups for the darker elements of her works as well as for including profanity in her dialogue; consequently, some of her books have been banned by schools and libraries. She also has been charged with didacticism, for writing puzzling and inconsistent endings, and for creating some characters that are too good to be true. However, most reviewers commend Paterson for writing works that are resonant, moving, and uncompromising, books that both challenge and entertain her audience. Paterson is regarded as a major writer whose honesty, compassion, literary skill, and themes of freedom and unification show sincere respect for young people while demonstrating her knowledge of, and faith in, humanity as a whole.

Called “arguably the premier author among children’s book writers today” by Ilene Cooper of Booklist, Paterson has been praised consistently by critics. Writing in Dictionary of Literary Biography, M. Sarah Spedman remarked that what the author has written “achieves excellence because her artistic vision embraces all that is human and because she is a master craftsman.” Spedman concluded, “Because Paterson perceives the grandeur with which the world is charged and because she writes from the heart of themes which haunt her, her books have the enduring value that will help to make tomorrow’s children, as well as today’s, make the connections she outlines.” A reviewer in the St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers remarked, “Paterson’s contribution to the field of young adult literature has been immeasurable.” Jane Resh Thomas of the New York Times Book Review offered that Paterson takes her readers “to the nadir, the dead of winter, when it seems that all is lost, and then propels them up into springtime. While her situations sometimes border on melodrama, her quiet voice, merely stating the facts, sounds so sensible that one accepts her stories as hard truths.” Thomas concluded that Paterson’s “clear vision of humanity’s mixed character and her hope despite that knowledge give realism a good name.” Writing in Entertainment Weekly, Michele Landsberg noted, “Unlike many of her fluffier contemporaries, Paterson offers no cheap sentiment or glib solutions. She’s brilliant at evoking both the idealism and the ignorant prejudices of childhood, the romantic stirrings of adolescence,
and the oblique, offhand way kids express their deepest feelings.” Writing in his Katherine Paterson, Gary D. Schmidt predicted, “Paterson will be remembered for her powerful plots, but she will also be remembered for telling the truth about universal things. Her work is . . . story woven with truth, so that the reader will know the place and feeling. It is a bridge lovingly and expertly built, guided by the reality of the fallen world, and arching gracefully toward the Promised Land, for which she is a spy.”

Paterson has stated that the background of a writer is a significant factor in the shape and content of a book; she also has noted that her characters are reflections of herself. “When I look at the books I have written,” she commented in the Horn Book, “the first thing I see is the outcast child searching for a place to stand.” Paterson was born in Qing Jiang, China, the middle child of five born to George and Mary Womeldorf. She wrote in Horn Book, “If I tell you that I was born in China of Southern Presbyterian missionary parents, I have already given away the three chief clues to my tribal memory.” In an interview with Gary D. Schmidt, Paterson revealed that her main influences are her Presbyterian background, her childhood in China, and her years living in the southern United States. Before going to China, George Womeldorf was raised on a farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and had drove an ambulance with the French in World War I, an experience that resulted in the loss of his right leg. Paterson wrote that her father was “as ideally suited as any Westerner to go to China. He was intelligent, hard-working, almost fearless, absolutely stoical, and amazingly humble, with the same wonderful sense of humor found in many Chinese.” During the first decade of Paterson’s life, the Jaingsu Province, in which her birthplace is located, was beset with fighting between the communists and Kuomintang forces. Paterson lived in the city of Huaian, where her father ran a school for boys. The family resided in a school complex in which all of her neighbors were Chinese, and Paterson learned to speak Chinese before English. Her early years in China helped Paterson to develop a deep appreciation for the Chinese people and their culture. With the Japanese invasion of China, Paterson was sent to America at the age of five. This began a pattern that would affect both her life and her work: between the ages of five and eighteen, the author would move eighteen times. Paterson described herself during these years in A Sense of Wonder: On Reading and Writing Books for Children: “I remember the many schools I attended in those years mostly as places where I felt fear and humiliation. I was small, poor, and foreign. Somehow the previous school had never quite prepared me for the curriculum of the present one. I was a misfit both in the classroom and on the playground. Outside of school, however, I lived a rich, imaginative life.” In her Gates of Excellence: On Reading and Writing Books for Children, Paterson recalled, “Among the more than twice-told tales in my family is the tragic one about the year we lived in Richmond, Virginia, when I came home from first grade on February 14 without a single valentine. My mother grieved over this event until her death, asking me once why I didn’t write a story about the time I didn’t get any valentines. ‘But, Mother,’ I said, ‘all my stories are about the time I didn’t get any valentines.’

After a year in Virginia, Paterson and her family returned to China, but it was too dangerous for them to return to their home; only George Womeldorf, who crossed the combat zones at great personal risk, was allowed to return. The rest of the family lived among foreigners, mostly in the British section of Shanghai. One day, Paterson witnessed Japanese soldiers practicing a mock invasion. She told the Horn Book, “I was out playing and heard this blood-chilling sound. Soldiers wearing only a loincloth and carrying guns with bayonets were coming up our yard. I
grabbed my little sister’s hand and ran for all I was worth.” When she was eight, Paterson was taken from China for a second time; she would not return until 1981, when she was researching the background for her novel *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom*. The family relocated to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where her father worked as a clergyman. Paterson wrote in *Gates of Excellence* about her experience as a new student in the local elementary school, the Calvin H. Wiley School: “I had only recently gotten off a boat that had brought us refugeeing from China. I spoke English with a British accent and wore clothes out of a missionary barrel. Because children are somewhat vague about geography, my classmates knew only that I had come from somewhere over there and decided I was, if not a Japanese spy, certainly suspect, so they called me, in the friendly way that children have, ‘Jap.’ The only thing I could do anything about was the accent. Although I have since that time lived in five states and one foreign country, I still speak like a North Carolinian.” She added that “on the hills and playgrounds of Wiley School were spent some of the most miserable hours of my life.”

Paterson found solace in her reading and writing. She had taught herself to read before she reached school age and, although there were no English libraries or bookstores in their area of China, her mother read frequently to Katherine and her siblings from the Bible and classic children’s literature, much of it by English authors. Paterson wrote in *Gates of Excellence*, “I can almost recite from heart the poems and stories of A. A. Milne, and I loved [Kenneth Grahame’s] *The Wind in the Willows* almost as fanatically as the youth of the sixties loved Tolkien.” At the age of seven, Paterson had a short poem published in her school newspaper, the *Shanghai American*. At eight, she began to write imitations of the notorious “Elsie Dinsmore” stories, tales about, as Paterson describes her, “a pious Victorian child whose mother was dead and whose father was an unfeeling unbeliever.” After moving to Winston-Salem, Paterson discovered the school library. She wrote, “I do not think it would be hyperbolic to say that it saved my sanity.” She added, “I read everything of Kate Seredy and Robert Lawson and Rachel Field that the shelves contained.” Later, Paterson would discover books like *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, and *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton, all of which had a profound effect on her. By the time that she was in fifth grade, Paterson’s writing had begun to gain her some recognition. She told Virginia Buckley of *Horn Book*, “I was very verbal and started writing plays. The kids respected this. I loved acting and was the evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*.” In sixth grade, she wrote plays regularly for her classmates to act. Paterson also became a library aide and was taught to mend books in a loving and artistic way by the school librarian. Paterson recalled, “I have never taken more pride in any job I have held than I took in being a library aide at Calvin H. Wiley School. And I am sure that my sensuous love for books as paper, ink, and binding, treasures to be respected and cherished, is in large part due to the Wiley School librarian.” Despite her love of books and literature, Paterson did not want to be a writer. “When I was ten,” she wrote on her Web site, “I wanted to be either a movie star or a missionary. When I was twenty, I wanted to get married and have lots of children.”

Before she was eighteen, Paterson attended thirteen schools in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. George and Mary Womeldorf settled finally in Winchester, Virginia, where George became the associate pastor of a Presbyterian church. After graduating from high school, Paterson attended King College in Bristol, Tennessee. Here, as she noted on her Web site, “I spent four years reading English and American literature and avoiding math wherever possible.”
Writing in *Gates of Excellence*, Paterson recalled that by the time she got to college, “I had apparently read enough so that it was beginning to rub off a bit on my work. Indeed, an English professor once noted my chameleonic tendency to adopt the style of whatever literary figure I happened to be doing a paper on. I am grateful that he encouraged me to write papers on only the best. An apprenticeship imitating the masters of the English language was bound to have a beneficial effect.” At King College, Paterson discovered Shakespeare, Sophocles, and the English poets John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins (whose surname later would provide that of one of Paterson’s most popular characters, Gilly Hopkins). Paterson also read the “Narnia” series of children’s fantasies by C. S. Lewis. She recalled, “I lost my voice reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* aloud on the tour bus that was taking the college choir to Atlanta to sing.” Later, one of Lewis’s “Narnia books, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, would inspire Paterson when she named the imaginary land that Jess and Leslie create in *Bridge to Terabithia*. Lewis includes an island called Terebinthia in his work, and Paterson recalled it unconsciously when she was naming her own world. In 1954, Paterson graduated summa cum laude from King College.

After her graduation, Paterson taught sixth grade for a year at the elementary school in Lovettsville, a small rural town in Virginia that became the setting for *Bridge to Terabithia* more than twenty years later. She then went to Richmond, Virginia, to work on her master’s degree in Christian education at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education. While attending this school, one of her favorite teachers stopped Paterson in the hall and asked her if she had ever thought of becoming a writer. Paterson recalled her response in *Gates of Excellence*: “‘No,’ I replied, swelling with twenty-four-year-old pomposity. ‘I wouldn’t want to add another mediocre writer to the world.’ ‘But maybe that’s what God is calling you to be.’ She meant, of course, that if I wasn’t willing to risk mediocrity, I’d never accomplish anything.” After receiving her master’s degree, Paterson was told by a friend, a female Japanese pastor, that she would find a home in Japan if she gave the Japanese people a chance. Despite misgivings prompted by her memories of Japan’s war with China, Paterson went to Kôbe, Japan, to serve as a Presbyterian missionary. After studying the Japanese language for two years at the Naganuma School, she went to work on the island of Shikoku, where she became an assistant in Christian Education to eleven country pastors. Paterson confirmed that her friend was right. “In the course of four years, I was set fully free from my deep childish hatred. I truly loved Japan.” She added, “You see, in those four years I had become a different person. I had not only learned new ways to express myself, I had new thoughts to express. I had come by painful experience to a conclusion that linguists now advance: language is not simply the instrument by which we communicate thought. The language we speak will shape the thoughts and feelings themselves.”

Paterson planned to spend the rest of her life in Japan. However, when she was offered a fellowship to study Christian Education at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1961, she moved back to the United States. At the seminary, Katherine fell in love with a fellow classmate, John Barstow Paterson, a Presbyterian minister from Buffalo, New York. The couple married in 1962; that same year, Paterson received her second master’s degree. After her marriage, Paterson worked as a substitute teacher (which she considers the worst job that she ever had) and then as a teacher of English and Sacred Studies at the Pennington School for Boys, a prep school near Princeton, New Jersey. In 1964, Paterson accepted her first professional assignment as a writer: creating Sunday School curriculum units for the Presbyterian Church that
were directed to readers in the fifth and sixth grades. Paterson wrote in *Gates of Excellence*, “I became a writer, then . . . without ever really formulating the ambition to become one. When the curriculum assignment was completed, I turned to fiction, because that is what I most enjoy reading.” Her first book, the religious education volume *Who Am I?*, was published in 1966.

In 1965, Katherine and John Paterson welcomed their first son John. Six months later, they adopted their first daughter Lin, who was born in Hong Kong. In 1966, the Patersons moved to Takoma Park, Maryland, where their son David was born. That same year, the couple adopted another daughter, Mary, who was born on an Apache reservation in Arizona. While living in Maryland, Paterson began writing annual Christmas stories for her husband to use at his services at Takoma Park Presbyterian Church; these stories later were published in two volumes, *Angels and Other Strangers: Family Christmas Stories* and *A Midnight Clear: Stories for the Christmas Season*. John Paterson provided editorial advice on these stories; later, he would collaborate with his wife on two informational books for middle graders: *Consider the Lilies: Flowers of the Bible*, a work that presents background material on the flora that appears in the Old and New Testaments, and *Images of God: View of the Invisible*, a book that interprets the forms and roles that God takes in Scripture, such as light, wind, fire, dove, king, judge, and architect. In 1973, Paterson produced two additional volumes of religious education material for the Presbyterian Church, *To Make Men Free* and *Justice for All People*. In the same year, she published her first work of fiction, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, a story that she wrote in an adult education class on creative writing.

A historical novel for young adults set in Japan during the twelfth century, a time of warfare between rival clans, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* outlines the search of thirteen-year-old Muna (“No Name” in Japanese), the illegitimate son of a peasant woman and a samurai, for both his warrior father—who has a chrysanthemum tattooed on his shoulder—and his true name. Muna goes to Heiankyo, the City of Eternal Peace, where he meets the thief Takanobu and the sword maker Fukuji. Torn between them, Muna steals Fukuji’s sword for Takanobu, who claims that he is the boy’s father. After being disillusioned by Takanobu, Muna ends up at the Rashomon Gate, where he lives with the city’s outcasts for three seasons. Finally, he returns with the sword to Fukuji, who forgives him and takes him back. As he enters his fifteenth year, which signifies manhood, Muna decides to keep his name, and the master accepts the boy as his apprentice. Inspired by the desire of Paterson’s daughter Lin to know about her biological parents, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* was praised for its character development, authentic background, and fast pace.

The author’s next book, *Of Nightingales That Weep*, is again set in Japan in the twelfth century; however, this tale features an eleven-year-old girl as its protagonist. Takiko is a talented musician who plays the koto beautifully, and she seeks beauty in life as well as in art. When her samurai father is killed, Takiko goes to live with her mother and her new husband Goro, a potter and distant relative who is of noble blood. Appalled by Goro’s disfigured, simian appearance, Takiko rejects him as a father. While struggling with her feelings, she plays an old koto belonging to Goro’s mother in order to comfort herself. Finally, Takiko repents of her intolerance and apologizes to Goro, who welcomes her back to the family. Most reviewers again recognized Paterson’s gift for story and inclusion of authentic detail in *Of Nightingales That Weep*, though some found the novel to be less effective than the author’s previous book.
Paterson’s next work, *The Master Puppeteer*, generally is considered the most outstanding of her three novels set in feudal Japan. A mystery story placed against the backdrop of a famine in Osaka that lasted from 1783 to 1787, *The Master Puppeteer* revolves around the discovery of the identity of Saburo, the Robin Hood-like bandit who robs from the rich and gives to the poor. Thirteen-year-old Jiro, an unwanted boy who is an apprentice puppeteer at the Hanaza theater compound directed by master puppeteer Yoshida, is determined to learn Saburo’s secret. Jiro becomes good friends with Yoshida’s son Kinshi, a boy who is trying to reconcile his own values with those of his father. Their disciplined, sheltered life at the theater is suddenly disrupted by a rioting, hungry mob, among which is Jiro’s mother Isako. Kinshi goes to her aid and sacrifices himself for the good of the people. Through his experiences, Jiro learns about the nature of reality and the reflection of life in art. A reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* called *The Master Puppeteer* “a brilliant novel,” while a critic in *Kirkus Reviews* claimed that “Paterson’s ability to exploit the tension between violence in the street and dreamlike confrontation of masked puppet operators is what makes this more lively and immediate than her other, equally exacting, historical fiction.” M. Sarah Spedman of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* concluded, “*The Master Puppeteer* suggests that hope for redemption of debased worlds, like eighteenth-century Osaka, may well lie in people like Kinshi, self-possessed and altruistic, who will give of themselves until it hurts.” Paterson received the 1977 National Book Award, an Edgar Allen Poe Award runner-up citation, an American Book Award nomination, and a citation from the Puppeteers of America for *The Master Puppeteer*.

She returned to Asia for another young adult novel, *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom*, which is the only one of her books of this type with a Chinese setting. Taking place during the revolt by the Taiping Tienkuo (the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace) against the Manchu rulers, the story features two teenagers, fifteen-year-old Wang Lee, a kidnapped peasant boy who is sold into slavery, and seventeen-year-old Mei Lin, an educated young woman who is a member of the Taiping. The characters are caught up in both the harsh military struggle and their spiritual searching. Wang Lee becomes a warrior for the Heavenly Kingdom; he kills mercilessly, convinced that the cause of the kingdom is greater than human life. However, both he and Mei Lin realize that their zealotry is misguided. The couple is separated but, at the end of the novel, reunite and marry. They resolve to conserve the battered land and to raise all of their children as equals. Although some critics noted that the protagonists seemed to exist merely to promote the theme, most observers praised *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom* for its epic scale, vivid story, and authentic detail. As with all of Paterson’s books on Asian culture, it also was acknowledged for providing information on time periods and places that are unfamiliar to most readers.

*Bridge to Terabithia* often is credited as the novel in which Paterson found her true voice as a writer. The book was inspired by the death of her son David’s best friend, Lisa Hill, who was struck by lightning at the age of eight; in addition, Paterson’s own bout with cancer provided the impetus for her story. In this work, ten-year-old Jesse Aarons, the only boy in a family of girls, is, according to M. Sarah Spedman of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, an “artist in the philistine stronghold of rural Virginia.” Consequently, Jesse’s father, whom Jess desperately wants to please, is concerned about his masculinity. Jesse hopes to be the fastest runner in the fifth grade, and he practices all summer. However, he is beaten on the first day of school by Leslie Burke, a girl who has moved into the house next door. Leslie is bright, well-read, spunky, and imaginative, and she and Jesse become fast friends. They discover a secret place in the
woods behind their homes that Leslie names Terabithia. In order to get to Terabithia, Jess and Leslie must swing on a rope over a creek. In Terabithia, Leslie introduces Jess to the joys of story and language; at her home, she plays classical music for him and involves him in discussions of world affairs with her liberal parents. In return, Jess teaches Leslie about country living. Jess finds himself growing taller, wiser, and stronger as the year progresses. In the spring, he is invited by a favorite teacher, Miss Edmunds, to go to Washington, D.C., for the day. Visiting the museums there, he vows to become a real artist. While Jess is in Washington, Leslie goes to Terabithia by herself. As she swings over the creek, the rope breaks. Leslie is killed when she hits her head on a stone and drowns in the water. When Jesse returns to find Leslie gone, he is angry and guilty. For the first time, his father speaks to Jess man to man and comforts him. As Jess passes through the stages of his grief, he begins to feel that it is time for him to leave Terabithia. Jess decides to give back to the world what Leslie had given him. He builds a plank bridge into Terabithia, over which he leads his little sister May Belle, crowning her with a wreath of flowers and telling her that the beautiful girl arriving today may be the queen for whom the Terebithians have been waiting.

Writing in Katherine Paterson, Gary D. Schmidt called Bridge to Terabithia “perhaps the most moving and painful of her books.” Jill Paton Walsh of the Christian Science Monitor wrote in her review of the novel that “Paterson is a fine writer who never puts a foot wrong, but her distinctive flavor comes from a serenity of vision which is uniquely hers.” Writing in Literature and the Child, Bernice E. Cullinan, Mary K. Karrer, and Arlene M. Pillar commented that Bridge to Terabithia “celebrates the vision of imagination and touches children’s hearts. The wealth of emotion and insights in the book hold potential for rich response from a number of perspectives.” Writing on his Web site devoted to the novel, Eric Petersen said, “When you hear the phrase ‘classic children’s literature,’ what books do you think of? . . . I think of Katherine Paterson’s Bridge to Terabithia. This timeless story serves to remind us that the gift of friendship is precious, fragile, and too often taken for granted.” Michele Landsberg of Entertainment Weekly observed, “More hot tears have been shed in fourth-grade classrooms over the death of Leslie Burke than for Bambi’s mama and the meltdown of Frosty the Snowman, combined. . . . Katherine Paterson’s portrayal of a taciturn, lonely boy’s mourning is so wrenching that to read it is to experience grief firsthand. For thousands of children, in fact, Leslie’s death is their first full-hearted confrontation with mortality. Many look back on reading Bridge as a rite of passage.” Landsberg concluded, “Paterson is scorchingly honest and uncannily sharp about a child’s inner life. We share Jess’s depth of loss because we recognize our own familiar frailties in him. . . .” Paterson was awarded the Newbery Medal and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, along with several other prizes, for Bridge to Terabithia. The book has retained its popularity with readers and has prompted several Web sites. In her Newbery Award acceptance speech for Bridge to Terabithia, Paterson stated that “of all the people I have ever written about, perhaps Jesse Aarons is more nearly me than any other, and in writing this book, I have thrown my body across the chasm that had most terrified me.”

In 1977, the Paterson family moved from Takoma Park, Maryland, to Norfolk, Virginia, where John Paterson became the pastor of Lafayette Presbyterian Church; the family stayed in Norfolk until 1986, when they moved to Barre, Vermont. During this period, Katherine Paterson cemented her reputation as a distinguished writer of books for children and young people. She received the 1979 National Book Award, William Allen White Children’s Book Award, and a
Newbery Honor Book designation for *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, a humorous, bittersweet novel that was inspired by Paterson’s two-month stint as a foster parent. Abandoned by her flower-child mother, Galadriel “Gilly” Hopkins has spent her eleven years in a number of foster homes. Feisty yet sensitive, she distrusts affection and masks her vulnerability with a sharp tongue. Finally, Gilly acknowledges that her biological mother, around whom she has created elaborate fantasies, really does not want her. Next, Gilly admits that she really loves and respects Maime Trotter, the sloppy, big-hearted woman who has taken her in. At the end of the novel, Gilly must go to live with her grandmother, but before she goes she manages to tell Trotter that she loves her. *The Great Gilly Hopkins* often is recognized as Paterson’s funniest book, but observers also note the panache with which the author delineates her characters and situations. Writing in *Washington Post Book World*, Natalie Babbitt said, “Gilly is a liar, a bully, a thief; and yet, because Paterson is interested in motivations rather than moralizing, the reader is free to grow very fond of her heroine. . . . What Paterson has done is to combine a beautiful fairness with her affection for her creations, which makes them solidly three dimensional.” Anne Tyler of *Washington Post Book World* concluded, “I’d adopt [Gilly] any day.”

Paterson received her second Newbery Medal for *Jacob Have I Loved*, which often is considered her best and most complex book. The first of the author’s works to be written in first person, *Jacob Have I Loved* is set on the imaginary island of Rass in Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay during World War II; it takes its title from a line from the Bible spoken by God: “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” At thirteen, Sara Louise Bradshaw has been blessed with health and strength, in contrast to her twin sister Caroline, a frail flower who is both beautiful and musically talented. Like Esau in the Bible, Louise feels that she has been deprived of her birthright: the elder twin by a few minutes, she believes that her parents have neglected her in favor of her sister, of whom she becomes increasingly jealous. In addition, Louise blames God for judging her before she was born, and she stops praying and going to church. Louise relies on fishing with Call Burnett, a reliable but overly literal boy, to provide her with friendship and extra money for her family. Louise and Call become friends with Captain Wallace, an older man who has returned to his home on the island after many years. Louise discovers that she is in love with the captain, and she is hurt bitterly when Caroline intrudes on their friendship. During World War II, Louise steps into a man’s role, gathering oysters and crabs with her father on his boats. After the war, Caroline and Call marry. Slowly, the encounters that Louise has with others, such as her mother, her grandmother, and Captain Wallace, end her obsessive feelings about Caroline and lead her to new hope and understanding. Louise decides to leave Rass and build her own life. In an epilogue; Louise is a married woman and a midwife. Assisting at the birth of twins, the finds herself neglecting the healthy first-born one to take care of the frail second-born. Louise catches herself and asks the children’s grandmother to cuddle the first twin while she suckles the frail one from her own breast. Paterson was applauded for her astute exploration of the theme of sibling rivalry as well as for her characterizations and creation of a fishing community. In his review of *Jacob Have I Loved* in *School Librarian*, Dennis Hamley called Paterson “a remarkable novelist,” while Betty Levin of the *Christian Science Monitor* called the work “a breath-taking novel.” Levin concluded, “This is a book full of humor and compassion and sharpness; it tells a story as old as myth and as fresh as invention.”

In 1986, the Patersons moved to Barre, Vermont, where John became the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Barre; he has since retired. Paterson continues to write well-received
novels for middle graders and young adults while expanding her repertoire. For example, she produced a trilogy of easy readers about Marvin, a small boy whose understanding family helps him to overcome the trauma of moving, the difficulty of learning to read, and the sadness in taking down a homemade Christmas wreath. Paterson also has created a number of picture books and original folktales--of which *The King’s Equal*, a story in which an arrogant prince learns humility from the woman he has chosen as his bride, is perhaps the most popular--and has written primary-grade fiction that blends reality and fantasy. She also has written a retelling of a thirteenth-century epic poem about Parzival, the knight who found the Holy Grail, and a retelling of the Bible story of Balaam and the Ass; in addition, she has translated retellings of Oriental folktales.

Paterson has continued to receive accolades for her historical novels. *Lyddie* was named an honor book by the International Board of Books for Young People and *Jip: His Story* won the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction. These books represent something unique in Paterson’s canon--they are the first of her novels for young adults to be linked by character, and they are her first to have the eastern seaboard of the United States as their locales. Set during the American Industrial Revolution of the 1840s, *Lyddie* features thirteen-year-old Lyddie Worthen, a Vermont girl who is deserted by her father and made an indentured servant by her debt-ridden mother. In order to earn enough money to save the family farm, Lyddie leaves her home and goes to work in a factory mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. She encounters a variety of experiences, both good and bad. Lyddie endures the insanity and subsequent death of her mother, the death of her siblings, and the grueling conditions of the mill, but she also learns to depend on herself as a person and a woman and to learn about the joys of reading. Lyddie also becomes aware of the injustice of slavery, and she helps a runaway slave to escape. In addition, she becomes aware of the inequality of women. After saving a coworker from the unwanted advances of the mill owner, a man whom she herself has rebuffed, Lyddie is fired. She then discovers that her family’s farm has been sold to her Quaker neighbors. Finally, Lyddie decides to go to Oberlin College in Ohio, a school that accepts both women and men. Writing in *Horn Book*, Elizabeth S. Watson called *Lyddie* a “superb story of grit, determination, and personal growth,” while Mary L. Adams of *Voice of Youth Advocates* said that its “story and characterizations are Paterson at her best.”

*Jip: His Story* is set ten years after the conclusion of *Lyddie*. Jip (short for “Gypsy”) West is a foundling of about ten or eleven who does not know where he came from. He works on the poor farm in his rural Vermont town, where he has established bonds with both the human and animal residents. Jip takes special care of Put, an old man who has been placed in a wooden cage because of his fits of self-destructive violence; the boy helps to give his friend a sense of dignity. One day, Jip encounters an ominous-looking stranger. The man, a slave trader, tells Jip that his mother was a runaway slave and that his father, the master of a Southern plantation, has arrived to claim his property. Once his background is revealed, Jip encounters racism. With the help of his teacher, Lyddie Worthen from the previous book, and her sweetheart, the Quaker Luke Stevens, Jip escapes to Canada, but not before Put is killed. Jip is welcomed as a free man into the home of the former slave whom Lyddie had helped in the previous novel. Paterson portrays Jip’s growing consciousness; the poverty and mistreatment of the time, especially of the poor and the mentally ill; and the struggle between abolitionists and slave holders. Writing in *Booklist*, Hazel Rochman said, “What a story. It’s not often that the revelations of the plot are so
astonishing--and yet so inevitable--that they make you shout and think and shiver and cry. Paterson has taken the old orphan foundling tale . . . and made it new.” Kathleen Jewett of the New York Times Book Review noted that, in Jip: His Story, “issues that too often remain abstract in a textbook come to life.” Jewett concluded that Paterson “is consciously writing in the great tradition of Oliver Twist and Uncle Tom’s Cabin. She allows her readers to face some disturbing parts of our history, but she also gives them a hero to admire and emulate; she teaches that every life has value and that loyalty and courage matter more than power and money.”

Paterson has written, lectured, and been interviewed extensively about being a writer for the young. Writing in Gates of Excellence, she comments: “When people ask me what qualifies me to be a writer for children, I say I was once a child. But I was not only a child, I was, better still, a weird little kid, and . . . there are few things, apparently, more helpful to a writer than having once been a weird little kid. An earnest mother asked me last year how she could encourage her son to become a writer. I couldn’t imagine what to say in reply. Have him born in a foreign country, start a war that drives him, not once, but twice like a refugee to another land, where his clothes, his speech, his very thoughts will cut him off from his peers; then, perhaps, he will begin to read books for comfort and invent elaborate fantasies inside his head for entertainment. You will be glad to know I kept my mouth shut. I do not believe for one minute that her son needs to experience what I’ve experienced in order to write books. I’m sure there are plenty of fine writers who have gone on to do great things. It’s just that we weird little kids do seem to have a head start.”

In an article for Writer, Paterson explained, “I keep learning that if I am willing to go deep into my own heart, I am able miraculously to touch other people at the core. But that is because I do have a reader I most try to satisfy--that is the reader I am and the reader I was as a child. . . . This reader demands honesty and emotional depth. She yearns for clear, rhythmically pleasing language. . . . And above all she wants characters that will make her laugh and cry and bind her to themselves in a fierce friendship.” Writing in Theory into Practice, Paterson stated, “My aim is to engage young readers in the life of a story which came out of me but which is not mine, but ours. I don’t just want a young reader’s time or attention, I want his life. I want his senses, his imagination, his intellect, his emotions, and all the experience he has known breathing life into the words upon the page. . . . I know that without the efforts of my reader, I have accomplished nothing. . . . I have not written a book for children unless the book is brought to life by the child who reads it. . . . My aim is to do my part so well that the young reader will delight to join me as coauthor. My hope (for there are no guarantees) is that children in succeeding generations will claim this story as their own.” In an essay in Children’s Books and Their Creators, Paterson concluded, “Why do I write for children? Because I’m practicing. Someday if I keep working at my craft, I may write a book worthy of a child--I may write a book worthy of the readers who have come to my books.”
FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

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PERIODICALS

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