

Through a child's eyes

Louise Borden has reached her young audiences by immersing herself in her topic, paying attention to every word, and writing with heart

By Carrie Schmitt

WRITING CHILDREN'S picture books has led Louise Borden on adventures that mirror the lives of her characters. After writing *The Little Ships*, based on the huge evacuation at Dunkirk, France, during World War II, she was invited to sail across the English Channel in one of the original ships involved in the mission, which rescued 340,000 Allied troops trapped by the German army. While researching *The Journey That Saved Curious George: The True Wartime Escape of Margret and H.A. Rey*, she traveled throughout Europe to create a map of the Reys' escape from Paris during the Nazi invasion using only their letters, photographs and a pocket diary for clues. (The Reys wrote and illustrated the original Curious George stories that became classics in children's literature.)

Although Borden's stories have taken her all over the world, she doesn't think a writer has to visit a place to write about it. "I didn't go to Dunkirk until after I had written *The Little Ships*, but my description of the setting was accurate," she says. "You don't have to see a locale to write about it. Immersing yourself in research through photos and books can offer vivid details."

Whether through the use of her imagination or an airplane ticket, Borden travels to the setting to develop plot and voice, which she says are her two biggest challenges. Before writing *The John Hancock Club*, she imagined herself as a student and visualized a third-grade classroom, where she discovered a class pet, a mouse. She decided to create a relationship between the main character and the pet, which became

INTERVIEW



Part of Louise Borden's talent is making a serious issue accessible to children.

part of the plot.

Borden's method has served her well—she has published 25 children's picture books over the last 20 years with Scholastic, Margaret K. McElderry Books (an imprint of Simon and Schuster), Houghton Mifflin and Clarion.

This doesn't mean success has come easily. Writing, like traveling, can be exhausting as well as exhilarating. While researching the Reys' lives, for example, Borden had moments of doubt so intense that she almost abandoned the project. Excerpts from her journal entries during that time demonstrate the uncertainty many writers face:

I feel discouraged in my quest for information. ... I feel as if I am flying blind: Maybe this book—and vision—will prove to be elusive. ... Why am I so drawn to this challenging project? How did I do this with [my other books]? Have I forgotten? I sense that I may be losing my hope. ...

Borden's passion for her subject and the writing process pushed her to overcome her fears, as this entry demonstrates:

The journey I have found myself on is remarkable. To hold the interest, and the vision, and the hope for all these years—chipping away, chipping away—and then finally trying to shape a text and find the right words.

So many lines yet to be written. ... I am a builder. I will find those words, and line them one by one across blank pages. I will build this book ... and find my way through unknowing and confusion, just as the Reys found their way on those crowded, fearful roads south.

THE WRITER®

In a recent conversation with Borden at her home in the Cincinnati area, she shared some of the insights she has gained on her journey as a self-proclaimed “traveler in writing and traveler in the world.”

How did you become a children’s picture-book writer?

When I first began to write for children in 1985, I joined the community of writers by reading about their lives. Today, I still collect books about writers, artists and photographers because I find their experiences informative and inspiring. I consider myself a student of the creative process.

For several years I also attended a weeklong writing workshop. In addition to hearing presentations from editors and accomplished authors, I made lifelong friends and developed a network of writers that has been invaluable to me over the years as a source of encouragement and support.

Describe your writing process when you’re at work on a story.

In my mind, I am working on a book—not a story. I am making something tangible with a page-turning quality that can stand up to countless readings. I envision what I will be holding at the end of the process, such as the book’s shape and size. I will not make those decisions—the art director and designer will—but the book dummies I make help me with the pacing of the story. I lined up the pages of my early books on the floor to see them visually. Although I don’t do that anymore, I still make dummies to help my writing process.

My goal is to write for children, so I always write with the child in mind. I also read everything I write aloud, over and over, because picture books are often read aloud to children. They must have a lovely oral quality about them, like poems.

Before you begin writing, you do extensive research, especially when writing historical fiction and nonfiction. What is your research method?

The Journey That Saved Curious George took me 10 years to research and write. In 1995, I read a sentence in *Publishers Weekly* that mentioned the Reys’ escape from Paris during the Nazi invasion. I held onto this clipping for years and began collecting any information I could find on the subject. I carried a photo of H.A. Rey with me to keep me connected to the project at all times. I also listened to radio interviews of Margret and H.A. Rey in my car.

I immerse myself in whatever topic I am writing about through photographs, newspaper articles, books, conversations with people—anything I can find that is related to the subject.

Some of your books address serious topics, such as cancer, war and the Holocaust. How do you make these age-appropriate for a young audience?

“EVERY TIME I START A BOOK, I AM A BEGINNER AGAIN. I THINK, ‘HOW DID I EVER WRITE THOSE OTHER BOOKS?’ ”

The big challenge is to take an event, such as the rescue of Dunkirk during World War II, and make this story accessible to children. When I am writing about history, I use the point of view of a child because real children did experience these events.

In *Sleds on Boston Common*, a child meets a British commander on the eve of the revolution while sledding, which is a child-centered activity that young readers can understand. They are able to experience this historical event in a similar way that a child might at that time period, rather than an adult.

Good Luck, Mrs. K! was difficult to get published because it is about cancer. But everyone, even children, knows someone who has been affected by cancer. From my conversations with children during school visits, I have found that they see it as a book about a wonderful teacher who rollerblades rather than a book about cancer, while the adults focus on the cancer. Luckily, Margaret McElderry agreed to publish the book, which became my most popular book that year and even won the Christopher Award.

Your books are known for their poetic prose. How do you incorporate poetry into your writing?

I have no formal training in poetry, but I can put poetry in my words because I pay attention to how other writers use language and absorb it into my own writing. Similar to poems, every word is important in picture books, and one word can change the delivery of an entire line. I use several techniques to put poetry into my writing, including:

- White space. Leaving space between words and lines in the text paces the reader and creates rhythm.
- Repetition. I repeat and italicize words to create a pause

THE LOUISE BORDEN FILE

- Louise Borden was born in 1949 in Cincinnati, an area she has lived in most of her life. She and her husband, Peter, have three adult children and two grandchildren.
- Borden graduated from Denison University in Granville, Ohio, with a degree in European history.
- She was an assistant elementary-school teacher for three years and made books to help her students learn to read before taking her husband’s advice to try to publish children’s books.
- She co-owned a bookstore from 1986 to 1991, which gave her insight into trends in the publishing industry.
- Borden has visited more than 500 schools to share her passion for literacy and writing with children and to get her books into the hands of teachers, librarians and students.

THE WRITER

And baseball is the field ...

the field ...
that expanse of beautiful green,

with a smooth swath of brown
between the infield ...

and the outfield.

Fences,

and foul poles,

and lines white with chalk ...

the snap of pennants
in a summer breeze.

and alert the reader to pay attention. In *Baseball Is ...* [a title currently in production] I repeat and italicize “the field” for emphasis.

• Word choice. I choose each word carefully. In *Baseball Is ...*, I use the word “snap” in the phrase “the snap of pennants” to end the section crisply.

• Strong verbs. Someone once said, “Verbs are the engines of

the sentence.” They move the

plot, so I choose strong verbs but do not use many adverbs.

• Variation. Using various sentence or phrase lengths can create a poetic sound.

The excerpt [shown above, in the graphic] from *Baseball Is ...* is an example of how I use white space, variation in sentence length, repetition and fresh language to create a poetic narrative.

How do you cope with writer's block?

I don't get writer's block, but sometimes I just don't know which way to go. When this happens, I reflect and ask myself, “Why am I writing this book? What am I trying to do?” If I don't know how to begin, I write a letter to the reader. This reminds me what the purpose and focus is. Often, the editor chooses to include this in the final draft.

I also revisit dummies from old projects when I am struggling with a new manuscript. Every time I start a book, I am a beginner again. I think, “How did I ever write those other books?” When I look back on early drafts of my published books and see how rough and unpublishable those beginnings were, it gives me hope that I can succeed with my current project.

Getting stuck in the middle of the manuscript often means that I need to simplify the story. I have too much going on and have gotten confused. I refocus by imagining one arrow going through the book, and everything is tied to that line. I have different strategies to get myself “unstuck.” I might change from fiction to nonfiction, [or alter] the point of view or the character's gender, or perhaps remove an adult character.

Taking a break from the manuscript

also helps if I am having trouble. When I come back to it, if something jumps out at me again and again, then I know this is a weak spot that needs revision.

You say that studying the lives of artists, such as Matisse (the name you give the mouse in *The John Hancock Club*), gives you courage. Why do writers need courage?

To express yourself truthfully by creating original and fresh material takes courage because you are sharing your innermost thoughts and your heart for others to read. You must grow a thick skin in the face of rejection, if your book gets a bad review or goes out of print. There is a whole list of discouraging moments.

When I recently visited Amsterdam, I heard many tourists ask for directions to the Van Gogh museum and Anne Frank's house. Isn't it interesting how Anne Frank wrote her personal diary never knowing that anyone was going to read her words? She didn't survive, but her thoughts did and have made such an impact on the world. Van Gogh only sold one painting in his lifetime, and now there is a whole museum in his honor.

I think these stories are inspiring, especially if you are not able to find a market for your work. I encourage writers to focus more on their writing than agents or publishers because that's when you are going to write your best. Hopefully it will be published, but maybe not. Then it is helpful to remember people like Anne Frank or Van Gogh—people who expressed themselves for the sake of expression.

What advice would you have for aspiring children's book writers?

I recommend attending a regional or national SCBWI [Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators] conference for many reasons—the informative presentations and lifelong friendships make the time and money worth the investment. Editors from publishing houses that do not accept unsolicited submissions often tell conference participants that they can send one manuscript to their attention. This is a great opportunity to get your work read by an otherwise unavailable outlet.

Perseverance has been so important in my writing life. I think all writers will tell you that this quality, more than talent, is the key to success in this field. You can be very talented, but unless you are sitting at your desk working, you are not going to be a writer.

Carrie Schmitt

Carrie Schmitt is a former medical writer whose work has appeared in various medical publications, including *The American Journal of Orthopedics*. She writes for *Senior Life*, *Cincinnati Parent* and Cincinnati Children's Hospital, and hopes someday to become a children's author.

