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Q & A with Christine McDonnell

By Patricia J. Murphy | Aug 22, 2022

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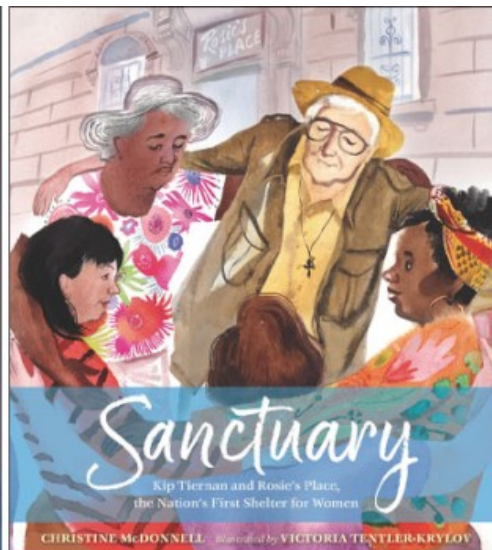
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Christine McDonnell's early love of books and reading led her to the library, the classroom, and the written page. A former NYPL librarian, school librarian, and teacher who studied under Augusta Baker and Pura Belpré, McDonnell is the author of a dozen books for children and young adults. Her 2020 picture

book, When the Babies Came to Stay, tells the tale of a librarian who adopts four children who mysteriously appear on a small island with nothing more than the clothes on their backs with notes urging: "Please take care of my baby." And her latest title is Sanctuary: Kip Tiernan and Rosie's Place, the Nation's First Shelter for Women, a picture book biography that honors the Bostonian activist and founder of Rosie's Place, a local woman's shelter. PW spoke with McDonnell about her life's work as a librarian and teacher, how her students influence her children's books, and why she weaves social emotional learning topics into her books.

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Can you describe your early experience at the NYPL with library luminaries Augusta Baker and Pura Belpré?

Right after college I went to library school and then went to work for the New York Public Library at the Mott Haven branch in the South Bronx. Augusta Baker had been one of my professors in library school. She was also the head of the NYPL's children services at that time. One of my favorite memories of working at the Mott Haven branch was learning how to make papier mâché hand puppets with Pure Belpré and watching her bring Puerto Rican folktales and her puppets Perez and Martina to life. Both Baker and Belpré were among the first to push to diversify library collections. They're also both examples of powerful women in our libraries. We stand on their shoulders.

Since I had both library credentials and a teaching license upon graduating college, I became a school librarian for two years at a junior high school for both seventh and eighth grade. Then, I was hired by Simmons College's Center for the Study of Children's Literature to do community outreach programs and to teach an introduction to children's literature class. Next, I went to work for the Brookline Public Schools where I taught eighth-grade English and social studies for a couple of years, and then taught ninth through 12th grades in English, literature, and writing—as well as sixth grade for many years.

I began my career in education in 1981, and I retired from teaching in 2014. The last 10 years, I was a school librarian in Brookline for a pre-K to 8th grade school. It was a busy school with about 900 kids, and nearly 26,000 books! It was a big job, and it was fun. I ran it like a public library, and we kept it open for my readers as long as I could. I didn't spend a lot of time on library skills; kids will always learn these when they need them. Instead, I focused on introducing kids to books, and creating a safe haven for them. I have been very lucky in my career. It has been both long and satisfying.

What were the best parts of wearing both teacher and librarian hats?

I liked being *both* a teacher and a librarian. Being in the library is just pure fun! The reason I became a librarian in the first place was that when I was doing my student teaching it became clear to me that I wasn't ready to tell people what to do. Being a librarian allowed me to sidestep that. So, attending library school became given for me. I'd always loved books; and, since my sister, Regina Hayes [who was head of Viking Children's Books for 30 years] had chosen publishing, I chose libraries! Libraries are so many things. For me, they've always been a refuge—and a place of pure delight.

When I decided to enter the classroom, I loved teaching junior high and high school; but with high school there wasn't the same kind of relationship and play that you could have when you teaching junior high. There was something truly special about teaching eighth grade language arts. It's because when you teach writing you really get to know your students. There's a much deeper connection here than with other subjects.

And what were some of the greatest challenges?

As a librarian, the challenge was to figure out what were the most useful ways to help support your teachers' goals, and to get the maximum number of books into their hands so they could effectively use them in their classrooms and with their students.

With teaching, the greatest challenge was to find the place where a child's strength was, to be able to play to this strength, and to make it clear to them how unusual and important that strength was. This becomes the ballast of your relationship. Another challenge was to make sure that my students were engaged and having fun.

When did you transition from being a teacher/librarian to writing children's books?

As part of my work I wrote reviews of children's books and had a column in the *Horn Book* for several years. At the same time, I was trying to write adult short stories. But it was when I was teaching at Simmons College that I decided that I wanted to try writing children's books. It happened at a conference during a panel discussion about the art of picture books with Uri Shulevitz, Arnold Lobel, and M.B. Goffstein. Someone asked them, "If you're not writing your own text, what's your ideal text to illustrate?" They all said, "Ones with no description!" And, that became my challenge. Because if you don't have description, you really have to push right to the heart of a story with a character in action. That comment was a springboard for me. At first, I thought that I was writing picture book texts, but the publisher put them all together as a chapter book, my first book, *Don't Be Mad, Ivy*.

In what ways have your dual careers informed your writing for children? And how have your students influenced your stories?

I learned how to write picture books by doing author studies with first graders as a school librarian. What I noticed with many picture books written by the Australian author Mem Fox was that the key elements of these stories were patterns, predictability, repetition, and rhyme, which made them fabulous for first graders. In many ways, they matched the structure for teaching children how to read. So I went home and wrote my first picture book, *Dog Wants to Play*.

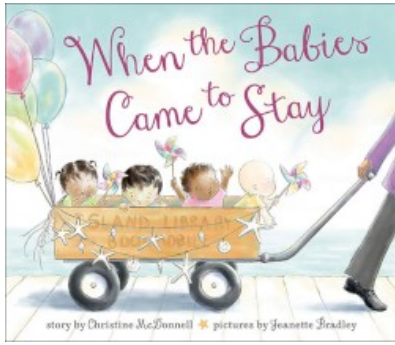
I also had several students in eighth grade who influenced my writing. Many were the only children in their family where there had been a marriage that ended and both parents remarried. Then, there were new babies that came into these blended families; and so the whole issue of how are you included, or not, and to what extent does someone feel stranded and/or not part of either household, intrigued me. And that's how *Count Me In* began. With *Friends First*, I had an eighth grade student who had been attacked, and when she returned to school her friends surrounded her, and stayed very close. You could see how gentle they were with her. This interested me, and so I had to write about it. I think the best stories are close to the heart.

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With those stories and your recent picture books, you tackle SEL issues that are personal to you head on. Can you talk about your most recent titles, which address difficult social issues, and what your hopes are for these books—and your readers?



It's important to me that these difficult issues and/or scenes in my books find a balance with the characters that demonstrate resistance, resilience, or provide positive answers. I'm not a fan of easy fixes or sugar-coating darkness, illness, abandonment, or sexual attack—I've included all of these issues in my books. But I'm also aware of children's need for a positive outlook. I think of it as righting the boat. Who will right the boat when these dark issues surface? It's always a character. In *When the Babies Came to Stay* the children are teased and asked where they came from and why they don't look alike. The librarian answers: "Families don't always look alike and where we're going is more important than where we came from."

In my book *Goyangi Means Cat*, I also write about a child who comes from a distant land. My daughter came from Korea when she was four years old. While the story is fiction, there are elements that are true, including many happy moments and outcomes. But there's also a true element of grief and loss and leaving at the heart of adoption that has to be acknowledged—it's not just sunshine.

As for *Sanctuary: Kip Tieran and Rosie's Place, the Nation's First Shelter for Women*, I taught at Rosie's Place for several years. It was an amazing place—and the pinnacle of my teaching career. I wanted to write about Kip Tieran, Rosie's Place, and the issue of homelessness. Homelessness is so huge right now that it can paralyze us. Kip showed impassioned persistence and the willingness to start small to help people who are homeless. You don't have to solve the whole problem. But you can do something for someone. Dare to be human—that's Kip's challenge to us. My hope for my latest titles is that they help readers learn to accept others with open arms.

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