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# Q & A with Katrina Moore

By Patricia J. Murphy | Dec 13, 2021

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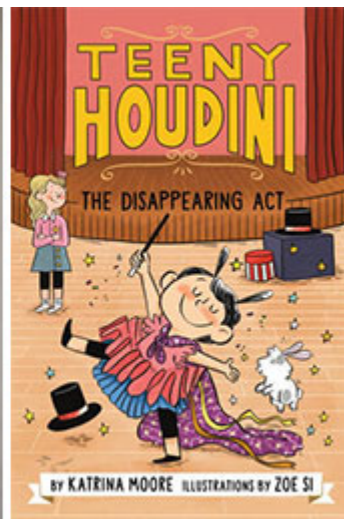
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Like the main character, Bessie Lee, in Katrina Moore's upcoming chapter book series, *Teeny Houdini*, Moore knows all about being tiny growing up—and stirring up magic. But unlike Bessie Lee, who Moore says, “uses magic to

*solve all of the problems of life. And, sometimes, she does, but sometimes she just creates more mayhem,”* Moore uses her magic to teach children and write books for them. In addition to the *Teeny Houdini* series, which will debut with two books in January and a third in July (read on for the cover reveal), Moore is the author of the picture books *One Hug*, *Grandpa Grumps*, and the forthcoming *Sometimes Love*. Moore is also a third grade teacher in South Jersey. PW spoke with Moore about how her teaching and writing careers influence each other, and how her early experiences with picture books—and helping one particular student tell his story—helped her find her voice.

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I was a psychology and art history double major in college and thought that I wanted to be an art curator at a museum. But, after college, I decided that I wanted to teach. I knew that I loved being around kids, loved their energy, and thought like a kid, too. So, I went back to get my Masters in elementary education, and started teaching. I have been teaching for 12 years in grades one through five. Today, I teach third grade in New Jersey, and I love everything about it!

But, hands down my absolute favorite part of each school day is reading aloud to my class. At this time, there is no pressure to do anything but to listen and to enjoy a story. My students are relaxed, and our conversations about the stories are so rich. I especially love the way we connect, and the way they connect to stories during this time. I also love it because I can see my children's interest in books spark and them turning into readers. Reading aloud helps them make connections to our reading instruction, their independent reading—and their own stories.

### What are some of the challenges?

For me, the challenge is meeting every single need of my students because I want to meet every child where they are, and to nurture and challenge them in the ways they need to be. But, because of the way we've had to learn over the last year and a half—and with all of the interruptions with their schooling—I have found that my students' needs are kind of all over the place. There are more needs because of the gaps in learning for those who struggled remotely, and these students are further behind academically than they would have been in a typical year. So, there is a wide range of what I need to do so that each of my children can have the best year possible.

On top of this, there was the loss of the social emotional development that happens throughout the day during unstructured times, through socializing and playing with each other. It's during these times when children can learn social skills like, "When someone talks, I will listen, give them eye contact, wait to respond, and then I will talk." We tried the best we could remotely, but it was difficult to simulate these types of authentic experiences. While I feel there is an overall pressure to catch up, I also feel what I need to do in my teaching is to slow down, to allow my children the room to breathe, and to give us the permission to focus on the social emotional skills that are especially important at this age.

### When did you start thinking about writing picture books?

Well, I've loved picture books since childhood, and have read them for enjoyment. I think they're part of the reason that I wanted to teach. But when I began teaching, I started reading picture books with a greater sense of purpose. I started thinking about what my students might get out of them, what I wanted them to get out of them, and which ones I would use to teach. It was then that I had an "aha" moment. I remembered that I did not have these kinds of books when I was young where I could see myself—or I couldn't find enough of these types of books. But I didn't start thinking about writing them until I was teaching.

### Can you tell us what happened?

I was teaching fourth grade at the time and I was looking for mentor texts to teach personal narratives. I discovered wonderful examples by authors Jacqueline Woodson, Patricia Polacco, and Tomie dePaola. And, after reading and discussing them with my students, many of them had lightbulb moments. They each started writing furiously. But one of my students wasn't having the lightbulb moment that I wanted for him. He wouldn't write. When we spoke privately, he



said that he liked the stories that we had read, but that they weren't his story. So, I asked him, "Do you feel comfortable sharing your story with me? Don't worry about writing it, just start telling me."

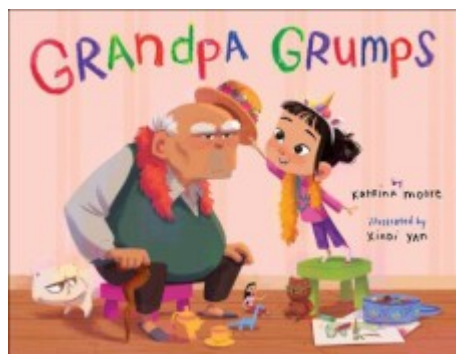
A childhood photo of Moore.

He told me that he and his mom had moved here from Mexico to the U.S., that he didn't feel comfortable sharing his name with everybody, that everyone was calling him "Johnny," but that it wasn't his name. He explained that they had picked the name because it was an American name. I told him that his story reminded me of my mother who took a big boat from Hong Kong, and moved to the U.S. with her mom and dad when she was a little younger than he was. Her family had to pick an American name for her, too, because they did not know how to say her Chinese name in English. So, her grandpa, my great grandpa, picked the first book that he found—which was the Bible—and he pointed to a name, which was Mary, and my parents named her Mary. While I was telling him this story, my student's face lit up, and he said, "That was like me, that's how we picked my name!" Then, he asked if he could write about that. And, I said, "Of course, you can!"

### What a magical moment! How did it lead you to start writing stories for kids?

Soon after I shared my mother's story with this student, I thought, "I can't believe that my own personal story was the one that helped spark his writing!" Then, I started to think about what else in my life could do that. While the story I shared was really my mom's story, I asked myself, "What stories did I need when I was growing up?" It was this question, along with a blog post "Why Couldn't Snow White Be Chinese?—Finding Identity Through Children's Books" by Newbery Medalist Grace Lin, that got me thinking about writing my own stories.

In the essay, Lin talked about her need for a "mirror" when she was growing up, and that she didn't see herself reflected accurately in literature or in the media. It was the first time I had read or heard anyone say anything like this, and I thought, "Oh, yes. Me, too!" And I started making other connections. I did feel the same things when I was growing up, but I wasn't able to put a label on them or name why it was that I didn't feel I fit in, that I thought I wasn't beautiful, or why I didn't feel I could dress up like Rapunzel. So, choosing to write for children all started as a realization—and a need to write these stories for myself. As I started to develop my craft, I was able to pull out the heart of the stories that I needed as a kid, and then branch out to the stories I wanted to write.



### Can you tell us about a few of your stories?

*One Hug* is a story full of joy. It starts with an Asian American child and his loving family giving hugs, having fun, and sitting around a multicultural table with hotdogs, hamburgers—and dumplings. In this story, as in all my stories, I make a point to show that there are many different types of stories even within one family or race.

*Grandpa Grumps* is about a little girl, Daisy, and her grandfather visiting from China who she is meeting for the very first time, and how she can't seem to connect with him or make him smile. It's about overcoming cultural differences and connecting across generations. A sequel, *Grumpy New Year*, will be out next fall.

*Sometimes Love* is about a little girl in a military family who adopts a dog, and then has to leave her dog because they have to move because her mother is deployed. Again, I wrote out of an area of a need because I was going through an abrupt change and a sudden move. I also had a dog that I loved so much that we could not bring with us. We found a wonderful family who could adopt her. This story is about love through changes.



And *Teeny Houdini* is my first chapter book series, coming out in 2022. Currently, there are three books in the series. The first two will come out in January 2022, and the third is coming out in the summer. [The



cover is revealed here.] It was my editor who encouraged me to try writing a chapter book series. I started by brainstorming all kinds of ideas and thought about my own childhood. As a kid, I was always really tiny. I knew what that felt like, so I wanted to write a loveable character who was tiny and got into a bit of trouble, which I also did. I also thought about the books that I loved as a kid, like the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park. And, as an adult, I also read the Dory Fantasmagory books by Abby Hanlon, and I connected with Dory. I loved her imagination and how she was often misunderstood, but she stayed steadfast in believing in herself. So I started thinking of a character who had some of those qualities, but different, and was also trying to find her place in her family. Lastly, I had to decide what she loved. I thought, tiny, teeny... she's Teeny Houdini! She wants to be the next Harry Houdini, and uses magic to solve problems in her life.

### How has your teaching influenced your writing?

My teaching makes me more aware of how much kids can handle and how amazing they are, because I see this every day. Also, knowing each of my students' backgrounds and what is going on in their home lives is part of my job. Through the years, I've observed many different home situations and children going through tough times in their young lives. This knowledge has helped me identify what my students need in the classroom and in my stories, too. I am constantly thinking about them and which of these kids haven't found a story that they have connected with yet. And I'm always asking myself, what is something that I could write for them?

### And in what ways has your writing impacted your teaching?

I have discovered that my writing process is different from those of my critique partners. And knowing this is the biggest thing that I bring to my writing instruction. I acknowledge that every writer has a different way that works for them, and allow my students to nurture their own writing process. So when I can teach them tools to write, I let them use the tools in their own way. While it's a bit tricky to have 21 students do this individually, it keeps them loving to write. I don't believe that most people start out disliking writing. I think they dislike how they were taught. So I am trying to nurture my students' love of writing and give them opportunities to continue to write creatively. I also share ways to get unstuck and what they can do in the moment to keep going.



### Can you tell us about your next book and your current works in progress?

After the ones I mentioned before, my next picture book coming out is *Hope Is a Hop* (Dial, spring 2023). It's about a little girl trying to build a garden, but a bothersome bunny is ruining it! She tries to plant hope while her family is going through a very

The Barnes & Noble book launch for Moore's picture book *One Hug*.

difficult time. As for my works in

progress, I am working on more picture books and a middle grade novel about a biracial main character who goes on a magical adventure where she learns about herself and her family.

### **What are your hopes for these future stories and your current books?**

I want my books to be the ones that readers are hugging, tucking under their pillows, earmarking pages in—and loving forever. I also want them to offer authentic experiences that my readers connect with. I want my readers to say, “Hey, that looks like my family and me,” and to see their fellow students in my books. I hope to open up my readers’ worlds—and for them to see part of their worlds, too!

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