

• Meet the Author •

Matt Tavares

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).



Baseball. Christmas Eve. In his extraordinary artwork, Matt Tavares undertakes these well-loved subjects. His pencil and watercolor illustrations lend a nostalgic feel to these most nostalgic of themes, while his delightfully detailed imagery and dramatic lighting evoke a true sense of magic. Matt Tavares grew up surrounded by books and reading. From the time he was very young, his mother read to him every night, and his family made countless trips to the public library. Years later, as a junior in college, he rediscovered his love for picture books and decided to try to make his own. "I thought back to my own childhood, and tried to make a book that I would have liked when I was a kid," he says. Now, as a successful author/illustrator, Matt Tavares lives with his wife and their daughter in Ogunquit, Maine.

Mudball is a story about the All-American sport of baseball. Looking over your body of work, one might assume that you are a baseball fan. How accurate is that assessment? Please share a bit about your personal history with the game.

MT: It's true—I'm a huge baseball fan. The Red Sox are my team, but I enjoy watching any baseball game, whether it's the Red Sox vs. the Yankees, or a minor league game. I grew up near Boston, and Fenway Park has always been one of my favorite places. As a child, I dreamed of someday playing for the Red Sox. As I got older, it became clear that I was much better at drawing than I was at baseball. But I still love watching the Sox, and I still have a great time playing softball every summer in my local league.

One of the great charms of this story is that Little Andy Oyler is such an underdog. He's short—the shortest man in the whole league—and he isn't much of a hitter, either. How did the character of Andy arise? Is he based on anyone you know?

MT: Andy Oyler was a real person, and I based some of

his character on the few things I knew about him, like the fact that he wasn't a very good hitter and that he was pretty small for a baseball player. I also relied on my own experiences of playing and watching baseball. I remember days in high school and Little League when I just couldn't seem to get a hit, no matter how hard I tried. And just like Andy, there were times when I wanted to quit. So I know just how Andy must have felt when he was in the midst of his horrible slump.

Mudball is very much a period piece and your narration is reminiscent of old-time radio broadcasts. How did you go about capturing the historic feel?



Were there any particular things you read, listened to, or viewed?

MT: I just tried to keep the text as simple as possible and describe the events in a way that someone would if they were watching them unfold in real time—much like a radio broadcaster. Originally, the text was much longer. But that slowed down the pace of the story a bit. So I whittled it down until the book could be read at a pace that matched the urgency of the situation.

Interestingly, I really wasn't trying to make it sound like an old-time radio broadcast. One of the great things about baseball is its timelessness. Whether it happened in 1903 or 2003, the story of Andy Oyler's muddy home run would probably be described pretty much the same way. I did plenty of historical research, but mostly for the pictures. I needed to make sure everything looked just as it would have looked back in 1903—from the players' uniforms, to the fans' clothes, to the ballpark itself. I found most of my information at the library and on the Internet. I think that the old-fashioned look of the pictures might help the text sound old-fashioned too.

Please discuss your choice of secondary characters for the story. How did you choose which other players/participants to include? Are any of them based on real people?

MT: All of the players mentioned in *Mudball* were actually members of the 1903 Minneapolis Millers. I chose Maloney, Yeager, and McCreery as the three base runners because they were all starting players, and it seemed possible that they would have been on base when Andy was up. McCreery was the biggest power hitter on the team, so I gave him the nickname "Slugger." For the opposing team, I originally included the names of players who actually played for the St. Paul Saints in 1903, but that got very confusing. There were too many names to keep track of. It made more sense to just refer to those players by their position, and call them the pitcher, the catcher, the first baseman, etc.

Because you are both an author and illustrator, it would be interesting to know whether you began the creation of this book with images or text. Please talk about your process for this book and your creative process in general as regards art and text.

MT: For the most part, I write the text first then do the pictures. But there is always a lot of back

and forth. Usually, my first draft is way too long, and I include lots of little details. Then once I decide what the pictures will be, I realize that I can delete some of the text, because a lot of the story will be told in the pictures. For example, in my book *Zachary's Ball*, the story originally included a whole paragraph about how much Zachary loved baseball. But once I made the pictures, I realized that if I showed a scene in Zachary's room, and the reader could see all his baseball posters and memorabilia, it would be clear that he loved baseball, and I could delete that whole paragraph. The same thing happened in *Mudball*. Once I drew the pictures, I took away a lot of the text that described the scene, because it was no longer needed.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

MT: They can go to their local library and look for my books, or they can visit my Web site at www.matt-tavares.com.

Books by Matt Tavares

- *Mudball*. Candlewick Press, 2005.
- *Oliver's Game*. Candlewick Press, 2004.
- *'Twas the Night Before Christmas: Or An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas* by Clement Clarke Moore, illustrated by Matt Tavares. Candlewick Press, 2002.
- *Zachary's Ball*. Candlewick Press, 2000.