

• Meet the Author •

Jacqueline Briggs Martin

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



Jacqueline Briggs Martin has always loved the sounds of words. She grew up on a dairy farm in Maine with three brothers and two sisters, received a B.A. from Wellesley College and an M.A. in Child Development from the University of Minnesota. Martin has published fourteen books for children, including the ALA Notable book *Grandmother Bryant's Pocket*. Her picture book biography of a self-taught scientist—*Snowflake Bentley*, illustrated by Mary Azarian—was awarded the 1999 Caldecott Medal by the American Library Association. *The Lamp, the Ice, and the Boat Called Fish* was named an ALA Notable Book. Jacqueline Briggs Martin and her husband Richard live in Mount Vernon, Iowa.

Your “Annie Livemore’s Oak Tree Notebook,” published in *Button, Bucket, Sky*, gives readers very specific directions about growing their own oak trees from

acorns. Have you had lots of personal experience in doing it yourself?

JBM: Yes, before the book was published I saved acorns. I picked up hundreds of acorns, did the water test as the book says, and stored the good ones in my refrigerator. During the winter I became busy with other projects and forgot about my acorns.

In the spring I noticed a plastic bag on the back of one of the refrigerator shelves filled with brown. Then I remembered my acorns! Some of them had actually started to sprout. I planted them in buckets and waited for them to grow. Many did. I gave them to friends who wanted oak trees.

Is Annie Livemore modeled on someone from your own life, an older person with a strong reverence for the natural world—and for children?

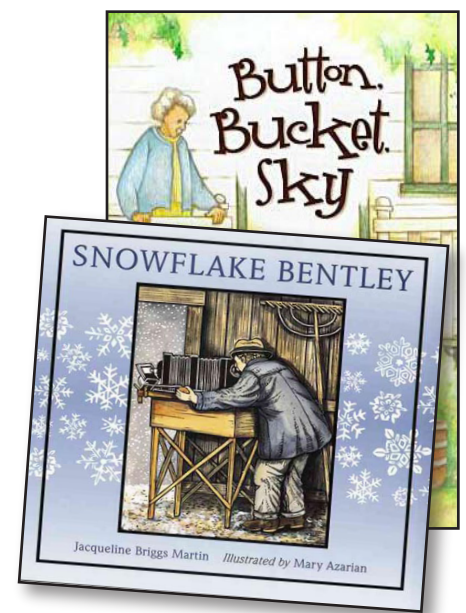
JBM: Annie Livemore is a person I would like to know, but there is no one person that I thought of as I was writing about her.

Many of your other books include older characters and the children who love them. Please talk about this theme in your books and what has inspired it.

JBM: When I was growing up we lived in the same house as my grandparents. They lived downstairs and we lived upstairs. My grandmother made the best filled cookies I’ve ever eaten and, though she did not play on the floor with us, was a constant presence in our lives.

A great-great uncle actually lived with us in our apartment. Though his name was Arthur, we all called him “Uncle.” I was probably twelve years old before I realized he had another name.

It is so apparent to your readers that you have a deep and abiding love for the natural world, its mystery, and its reliability. In Caldecott-winning *Snowflake Bentley* you wrote about a real person, Wilson Bentley from Jericho, Vermont. In *Button, Bucket, Sky*, you write about Annie



Livemore from *Six Penny Road*. What do the two have in common with each other—and with you?

JBM: I think Wilson Bentley believed there was something sacred about the beauty of snowflakes. He wanted others to see that beauty and be as awed by it as he was. That does happen when people see his photographs.

Annie Livemore believes in the healing power of trees. Both of these characters, one real, one invented, find inspiration and strength from the beauty and mystery of the natural world. So do I.

When I was young growing up on the farm in Maine I loved to walk down the lane behind the barn, sit in the grove of pine trees at the end of the lane, and listen to the breezes blow through the branches. Now, when I am in a beautiful forest in Maine, a patch of prairie in Iowa, or on the high plains of Tibet, I feel as Wilson Bentley did, that the natural world is a huge temple where we go to be awed by the beauty and remember that we are part of a huge web of life that is more than just people and people's things.

Was Hector a part of the story from the very beginning or did he sneak his way into the story? Why is he there?

JBM: Hector and Annie Livemore were always part of the story. I think in an earlier version Hector may have actually been a talking cat. I have always loved cats. Our first cat once brought a baby rabbit into the living room in the middle

of the night. My husband and I had to get out of bed and rescue that rabbit, which was hiding under the heat registers.

Another cat, which we had when we had small children, loved our children so much that she came down to our living room when she was ready to have her babies and gave birth to five kittens on a bath towel. We were very sad when Whitey was run over by a truck. We no longer have a cat but I still like thinking about them and writing about them.

You are well known for your long, complex, narrative picture books. Yet this picture book is short, simple, and very sweet. What are the rewards or challenges of writing in this shorter format?

JBM: This book took a long time in one sense. I love trees. I grew up in Maine, a state that seems like it's covered in trees except for where people have cut them down. I decided one summer I wanted to write a book about starting trees from seeds. I thought it would be a nonfiction book and include information about oak trees and pine trees. I wrote that book but no publisher wanted to publish it.

So I decided to write a story about starting trees from seeds and focus on oak trees because acorns are so beautiful. (I can never walk past acorns without picking a few up and putting them in my pockets.)

I wrote one version of such a story with Annie Livemore and some greedy cousins. It wasn't very good. I wrote another ver-

sion. Finally I decided I just wanted to write about gathering acorns and planting trees. I knew a boy like Little Sam and I thought the real "Sam" would have liked this tree planting. I wanted him to have a friend so I made up Harriet Grace.

Once I decided on these characters it was a lot of fun to think of the places they might have found the acorns, the containers they might have used, and the places where they might plant the acorns. It was like making a lot of lists. Student writers who don't want to worry about plot could start with this story and add to these lists.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

JBM: They can visit my Web site at www.jacquelinebriggsmartin.com and they can go to the Web site of the Children's Book Council (www.cbc.org) and look in the archives of About the Author/Illustrator for a column I wrote in 1999 after Mary Azarian won the Caldecott Medal for *Snowflake Bentley*.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of five picture books, most recently Our Librarian Won't Tell Us ANYTHING! A Mrs. Skorupski Story (UpstartBooks, 2006) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.