

• Meet the Author •

Marianne Mitchell

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



Marianne Mitchell is a genuine, born and bred Arizona desert rat. She grew up in Phoenix and now lives in Colorado. In 1992 she switched from teaching children to writing stories for children. Marianne has since published nine books for young readers and over one hundred stories and articles in children's magazines such as *Highlights for Children*. Her picture books include *Maya Moon*, *Joe Cinders*, and *Gullywasher Gulch*. Her middle grade mysteries include *Finding Zola*, set in southern Arizona near Tucson, and *Firebug*, set among the red rocks of Sedona, Arizona. She has also published an anthology of her magazine-length stories in a volume entitled *Windows of Gold*.

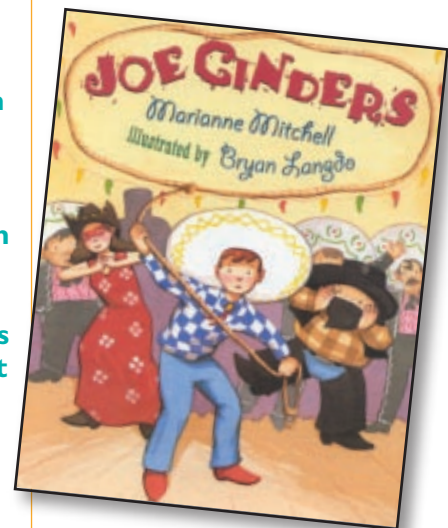
There are many Cinderella variants in print but yours is unique among them! Please tell us about the origin of your

wild west Cinderella story. What inspired you?

MM: The inspiration for *Joe Cinders* was almost an accident. My husband and I were on a trip to visit a friend in Utah when a guy in a red pickup truck swerved in front of us and nearly ran us off the road. I sputtered, "Whoa! Who does he think he is, Cinderella zooming to the ball?" We were OK, but the idea of Cinderella in a red pickup truck kept growing in my brain for the next several hours of our trip. By the time we arrived at our friend's house, I had the story all plotted out. I rushed in and begged to use his computer to get the first draft down in writing.

In some ways, writing a variant is a bit easier than creating a story from scratch because the overarching plot of the story is already determined. On the other hand, there are unique challenges in writing a variant too, because you must employ so much creativity in adapting the characters, plot, and setting within the constraints of the original story. What were the unique challenges of *Joe Cinders*?

MM: Using a well-known tale is a great help. It gives the writer a rough outline to follow. I knew what plot elements needed to be included: a family of step-relatives, an invitation to a party, a magical person to help make things happen, the magic ending at midnight, and some kind of lost shoe. The challenge was to switch all the female/male roles and set the story in the Wild West. Changing the characters and setting led me to make good word choices that lent a cowboy voice to the story and reflected the desert lifestyle. I couldn't have Joe go the fiesta in a golden coach, so I used that red pickup that almost ran us off the road. And he couldn't lose a glass slipper. It had to be a cowboy boot. I also liked the play on words at the end when Joe gives his



lazy step-brothers “important jobs” around the Red Boot Dude Ranch. That was fun!

The old stranger who stands in for the Fairy Godmother of the original story is an intriguing choice. How did you decide upon and develop this character for your story?

MM: The Fairy Godfather was part of switching all the female roles to male roles. He started out as a dowser, someone with a special talent for finding water with a crooked stick. However, my editor thought kids wouldn't know what a dowser was so we just kept his crooked stick and used it as a magic wand.

Miss Rosalinda is a character with a strong personality—an independent woman. She is very different from the rather shadowy Prince Charming of the original story. Please talk about your development of this character.

MM: I wanted both Joe and Miss Rosalinda to be active, can-do characters. It always bothered me that in some Cinderella stories the romance between Cinderella and the Prince was only sparked by beauty or royal heritage. One reference to Miss Rosalinda being pretty is in her name. “Linda” means pretty in Spanish. And Butch Bronco calls her “pretty li'l Rosalinda.” But she's more than just a pretty gal. She's a hard-working ranch owner, and we know she'd never fall for one of those lazy Bronco boys.

Your *Gullywasher Gulch* is another Wild West story and your novel *Firebug* is set in Sedona, Arizona. What brings you to that geographic region over and over in your stories and how does setting inform your plots?

MM: In so many ways, the settings in my books almost become characters themselves, influencing what happens and how people react. I grew up in Arizona so I used places that are near and dear to my heart. I worked on *Gullywasher Gulch* during the summer when wild thunderstorms often caused a great deal of damage because we'd get too much rain all at once. However, my editor on that book lived in lush, green Minnesota. Sometimes it was hard to explain to him how desert dwellers have a love-hate relationship with rain. We want rain, just not a gullywasher! The main character, old Eb, was based on my dad, who loved to save things, especially building supplies. Everyone teased him to get rid of his junk and his favorite response was, “Nope. I'm saving up for a rainy day.”

I set *Firebug* in Sedona, Arizona because my parents once owned a seedy old ranch there. Many 1950s western movies were filmed in Sedona, including one on that land called *The Last Wagon*. The red sandstone rock formations in that area are full of mystery. You can see shapes in the rocks that look like a courthouse, a bell, an eagle, even Snoopy the cartoon dog. You can find remnants of Native

American villages in the cliffs. Some people believe that the rocks have magnetic powers that can send you on spiritual journeys. Memories from my childhood of hiking around that ranch and looking for lost treasure are woven into the story.

My other middle grade mystery, *Finding Zola*, is set in a fictional Copper Valley, modeled after the real retirement town of Green Valley, south of Tucson. Since my main character, Crystal, uses a wheelchair to get around, that setting was ideal since every place is handicap friendly. The desert also plays a role because Crystal worries that Zola may be a victim of the hot desert sun.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

MM: Readers can visit my Web site: www.mariannemitchell.net. There they'll find tips for young authors, photos, discussion guides, answers to frequently asked questions, plus contact information for books and school visits. Come take a look!

❖ ❖ ❖

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 seven picture books, most recently *R* is for Research (*UpstartBooks*, 2008) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.