



Patricia Polacco

**TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

Patricia Polacco, interviewed in her home in Union City, Michigan, July 29, 2008.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When people who don't know you ask what you do for a living, how do you respond?

PATRICIA POLACCO: I tell them that I write and illustrate children's picture books. If I am talking to a lyrical human being who's still a child at heart, this opens an enormous conversation.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you were a child, did you love to write and tell stories?

PATRICIA POLACCO: Yes. I always loved storytelling, and I could draw very well from a young age. But I was and still am also severely learning disabled. I have dyslexia, dysnumeria, dysgraphia and failure of sensory integration. As a young person, stories came out visually. I could not write down what I was thinking. So my original books were wordless books that I wrote for friends. My family was poor, so when I was invited to birthday parties, I would give these books as presents, and I called them "Fat cards." So I guess I've probably been doing this illustrating and writing of stories all of my life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, is about a teacher who recognizes that one of his students, a girl, has been hiding the fact that she can't read. Was the girl you?

PATRICIA POLACCO: Yes. I didn't learn to read until I was 14. I got promoted from grade to grade because I could read enough to just make it. That changed, though, when my teacher, whose name was George Felker, invited me to wash blackboards one day after school. He asked me to make letters and numbers on the board with a wet sponge. As I struggled, I realized that he had discovered my most horrifying secret. He said, "Patricia, you have fooled us all the way to your 14th year, and you're not dumb. I have a friend that can help you."

Thirty years later, I saw Mr. Felker at a wedding. I remember racing across that room and grabbing him by his lapels, and I said, "Mr. Felker, you don't remember me. I was a student of yours..." Then we sat at a table, and I told him everything that he has meant to me and how he literally pulled me from absolute darkness into the light. I got to thank him. We were talking and crying, and he said, "What do you do for a living?" I said, "I make books for children."

TEACHINGBOOKS: When did you start creating children's books professionally?

PATRICIA POLACCO: I didn't write books for a living until I was 41 years old. I had received degrees in art and art history, and I used to restore antiquities for museums professionally. Then my nine-year-old son was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes. I created a book for him that showed what he had to do to survive. A friend of mine, the author Thatcher Hurd, said, "Tricia, have you ever thought of doing this for real?" He belonged to the society of children's book writers and illustrators in Oakland, where my family lived. I took Thatcher's advice and started

going to meetings, and I found out how books are made. I created seven stories, and my mother said, “Why don’t we take these to New York and see how you fare?” I saw 16 publishers and sold everything in one week. The rest is history.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You’ve had so many successful books, that are loved and respected by your readers. Which books, though, do you suppose students respond to the most?

PATRICIA POLACCO: The books about my older brother—*My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* and *Rotten Richie and the Ultimate Dare*, go over really well with students. The story behind *Ultimate Dare* is that when we were kids, my brother played hockey and I took ballet lessons. We argued all the time about which was better. He said that hockey was harder than ballet, and I said that ballet was harder than hockey. My mother made my brother take ballet, and she made me play hockey.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Several of your stories, including *Chicken Sunday* and *Betty Doll*, involve the bonds between family generations—grandparents, parents and grandchildren. What is special to you about these multigenerational relationships?

PATRICIA POLACCO: My parents divorced when I was very young. Both of them moved back in with their parents, so I had grandparents in both households. We spent the school year with my mother and the summers with my dad.

My mother’s mother was the penultimate storyteller, and my brother and I especially liked hearing stories about the old country. When she finished, we would say, “Is that true?” She’d say, “Of course, but it may not have happened. All story is true.”

The truth is the journey you take through the story. Did it make you cry or laugh? Did it make you wonder about things? That’s the truth of a story.

There is something unique about very old people being around the very young. I love thinking about how children have just stepped out of the light to come here, while an old person is getting ready to step back into the light. They have so much in common.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your stories also touch on topics that involve racial and cultural dynamics. Why are you drawn to these multicultural issues?

PATRICIA POLACCO: My mother’s family was Jewish. They immigrated from Russia and the Ukraine to Michigan and bought a little farm. My father’s people came from Ireland and ended up near East Lansing, Michigan. There was sometimes friction during family gatherings that must have left an impression on me. My aunties had a kosher kitchen, and people who aren’t Jewish don’t always get that. If the friction was getting serious, the elders of the family would remind us by saying, “Listen, we all serve the same God.”

Later in life I also lived in the inner city of Oakland for 41 years. The Martinez family, who are Latino, lived across the street, and the Washingtons, who were black, also lived nearby. Arabs lived down the block. This is how we grew up, with people of all cultures together. In my stories, I try to convey the reality of my childhood, and I hope children will also learn to respect and honor what other people believe.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Chicken Sunday* is about the relationship between three kids, their African-American grandmother, and an immigrant Jewish hat maker. *Mrs. Katz and Tush* also features Jewish and African-American characters. What messages do you want readers to take from these books?

PATRICIA POLACCO: The essence of *Chicken Sunday* is, “Don’t judge people by the way they look. Judge them by what you know of them that you have experienced.” The book reveals the customs of all the people that lived together in my Oakland neighborhood. Children looking at the pictures will notice that the hat maker, Mr. Kodinsky, has numbers printed on his arm, which means he was in a concentration camp during World War II. Mr. Kodinsky was also from Russia, and he became our friend.

Mrs. Katz and Tush is also about overcoming imagined differences. I was at Passover Seder, and there had recently been an incident in New York where an Orthodox Jew had struck and killed an African-American boy. It pitted Jews and blacks against each other. As I sat at Seder surrounded by black and other non-Jewish friends, I realized that Passover is really about being free from slavery. I thought, “These two groups of people have too much in common to be fighting each other.” I love this story of Mrs. Katz. So did Oprah Winfrey, actually.

TEACHINGBOOKS: One of your most touching and acclaimed stories is *The Keeping Quilt*, about a family quilt handed down through generations. How did you come to write this book?

PATRICIA POLACCO: My mother’s family had a quilt made of pieces of their clothing. We used the quilt to hold our babies in it when they were being named. We used it as chuppas during weddings. It’s been a tablecloth. We covered coffins with it. The quilt follows us from our birth until our last moments on earth. I thought, “I want to do a series of drawings of everything that quilt has experienced.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your magical story *Rechenka’s Eggs* follows the adventures of an elderly, poor Russian woman whose goose lays beautifully decorated Ukrainian Easter eggs, known as Pysanky eggs. What were some of the ideas behind this book?

PATRICIA POLACCO: *Rechenka’s Eggs* is a kind of a variation of the *Goose that Laid the Golden Egg*. There is a little old babushka that is lonely, and this animal becomes part of her life. The woman enters a contest every year for which she decorates eggs, and by accident, her goose breaks all of the eggs she has worked so hard to create. But out of this disaster emerges something wonderful. The goose starts laying beautifully decorated eggs. The story is about defeat and the phoenix rising out of the ashes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: More somberly, *Pink and Say* follows what happens to both a black and a white boy who meet during the Civil War. It is probably your saddest story, as it involves the murders of both a mother and a boy. It also might be the most referenced book you have that is part of the school curriculum. What do you want to convey with this book?

PATRICIA POLACCO: *Pink and Say* is just a little bit of history to show young people, on many levels, that nobody wins a war. The story was handed down from my great-great grandfather, Sheldon Russell Curtis. He fought in the Civil War and was interred in Andersonville Prison. He was left wounded on a field, and he was saved by a young black kid about his age—14 or 15. Sheldon had never experienced a black person before, and he comes to love Pinkus. The boys are captured and sent to Andersonville Prison, where Pinkus is hanged. Sheldon survives, and went on to father children, and so on, and lived an exemplary life. But at the same time as this is a story about how nobody wins a war, this was probably the first reaching of multiculturalism within my family, because my people had never experienced African-Americans before.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You illustrate your books with very different artistic styles. How do you settle on one for a particular story?

PATRICIA POLACCO: The story always dictates the style. I have a style that's cartoon-like, one that is photorealistic, and another that is impressionistic. In some books, I draw in pencil and only put color where I want your eyes to go. *The Keeping Quilt* is black-and-white, except for the quilt and the clothes that went into it. Similarly, in *Betty Doll*, about a little doll that my mother made as a girl and gave to me, the only things in color are the doll, the dress, and the origins of the doll dress.

I used a lot of sepia tones and grays in *Pink and Say*, because it's about a dark time that does not call for spirited colors. *Rechenka's Eggs*, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to draw these glorious Pysanky eggs and their majestic colors and patterns. The "Rotten Richie" books call for exuberance and the amazing poses and leaping children. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* draws on childhood colors that I remembered from my schoolrooms.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your writing process.

PATRICIA POLACCO: Because of my failure of sensory integration, I need to rock when I am writing. I sit in a rocker and I have papers and a pen and I jot down notes. Eventually those notes end up in a folder in a cardboard box. When I flesh out that story, I often conduct historical research. But for the most part, I rely on the emotional connection of my characters.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday for you?

PATRICIA POLACCO: I have many animals—sheep, goats, dogs and cats. So when I get up in the morning, I have to go out and chore. That means feeding and watering and a few other things. Eventually I make my way either to my writing room in my house or to my art studio, which is a block away. I'll work from about 9:00 until noon. If I'm working on the art portion of a project and am on deadline, I'll continue working until late at night.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

PATRICIA POLACCO: I believe that you should not work on anything unless you're truly inspired, because the words will show it. The fire has to be in your belly. I have a gazebo and fountains on my property, and if I'm stuck, I sit out there and play with my cats, or I do laundry or dishes. Other times I'll get in my car and go for a ride, or take my dogs for walks, or go visit friends. When I go back, I'm fresh and can work again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

PATRICIA POLACCO: That they're doing a magnificent job. Several teachers have changed my life, and I think teachers do this routinely. They do it every day.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you tell students?

PATRICIA POLACCO: I don't talk to them about my books. I talk about my internal life and theirs, and I explore what fires their imagination and curiosity. I talk about reading. I also tell children, "Watch what's happening around you. When you see injustice, try to step in."

One of my first books, *Meteor!* was about a meteor that landed in the yard of my grandparents' house. I carry a piece of it with me to schools and try to convince the children that if they touch the meteor, their wishes are going to come true. The children understand that if they want the world to be a better place, they are the ones who will have to make that happen. As they leave the auditorium, each one reaches up and touches the meteor, and I put my hand on theirs.

Books by Patricia Polacco (bibliography created November 2008):

- IN OUR MOTHER'S HOUSE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2009
- FOR THE LOVE OF AUTUMN, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2008
- SOMEONE FOR MR. SUSSMAN, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2008
- GINGER AND PETUNIA, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2007
- LEMONADE CLUB, THE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2007
- ROTTEN RICHIE AND THE ULTIMATE DARE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2006
- SOMETHING ABOUT HENSLEY'S, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2006
- EMMA KATE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- GRAVES FAMILY GOES CAMPING, THE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- MOMMIES SAY SHHH!, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- JOHN PHILIP DUCK, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2004
- OH LOOK!, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2004
- ORANGE FOR FRANKIE, AN, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2004
- "G" IS FOR GOAT, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2003
- GRAVES FAMILY, THE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2003
- CHRISTMAS TAPESTRY, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002
- WHEN LIGHTNING COMES IN A JAR, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002
- BETTY DOLL, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2001
- MR. LINCOLN'S WAY, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2001
- BUTTERFLY, THE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 2000
- LUBA AND THE WREN, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1999
- WELCOME COMFORT, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1999
- MRS. MACK, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- THANK YOU, MR. FALKER, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- IN ENZO'S SPLENDID GARDENS, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1997

- AUNT CHIP AND THE GREAT TRIPLE CREEK DAM AFFAIR, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1996
- I CAN HEAR THE SUN: A MODERN MYTH, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1996
- TREES OF THE DANCING GOATS, THE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1996
- BABUSHKA'S MOTHER GOOSE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- MY OL' MAN, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- JUST PLAIN FANCY, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1994
- MRS. KATZ AND TUSH, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1994
- MY ROTTEN REDHEADED OLDER BROTHER, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1994
- PINK AND SAY, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1994
- TIKVAH MEANS HOPE, Doubleday Books for Young Readers / a division of Random House, 1994
- BABUSHKA BABA YAGA, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1993
- BEE TREE, THE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1993
- CHICKEN SUNDAY, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1992
- PICNIC AT MUDSOCK MEADOW, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1992
- APPELEMANDO'S DREAMS, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1991
- SOME BIRTHDAY!, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1991
- BABUSHKA'S DOLL, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1990
- THUNDER CAKE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1990
- UNCLE VOVA'S TREE, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1989
- BOAT RIDE WITH LILLIAN TWO BLOSSOM, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1988
- CASEY AT THE BAT (written by Ernest L. Thayer), Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1988
- KEEPING QUILT, THE, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1988
- RECHENKA'S EGGS, Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1988
- METEOR! Philomel Books / a division of Penguin Young Readers Group, 1987

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