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Inside *MENDING HORSES*

A Conversation with M. P. Barker

Q: What was the inspiration behind *MENDING HORSES*?

A: This book is a companion to *A Difficult Boy*, which was inspired by the work I did at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts and by a document about an indentured servant that I came across while working at the Springfield History Museum’s archives. I loved the character of Daniel, the Irish boy from the first book, so much that I had to figure out what happened to him after the end of the book. I knew he had to do something involving horses, so a circus seemed a natural fit.

Q: What makes this book special to you? What important message do you feel it brings to young readers?

A: This book is special to me because it reflects my love of history and horses. The research on circuses was so much fun to do!

I don’t usually start out writing with the intention of conveying a moral or message; otherwise a story ends up being too much like a sermon. I feel that it’s up to the reader what message he or she takes away from the book. That being said, what I wanted to do with the story was to explore how friendship and love can help a group of misfits (Jonathan, Billy, Daniel, Liam, and Augusta) to heal one another’s broken lives. I’d like to believe that nobody is beyond healing, as long as that person is willing to reach out to someone else. I hope the story shows readers that there are all kinds of families and that it’s the people who love you (whether or not you’re related by blood) that make a true family.

Q: What inspired you to write, and when did you know you would become an author?

A: I wanted to be a writer when I was a kid because I loved books so much—I thought that being a writer would be so much fun. But I put that dream aside when I went to high school and



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college, figuring it was unrealistic (So what did I do? I majored in History and English—not so realistic after all. . . .). Then later in life, when I was working at Old Sturbridge Village (How realistic is that—dressing up in costumes and pretending it’s the 1830s!), I decided just to write for myself, as a hobby.

I took some classes and joined some workshops to learn how to become a better writer, and eventually my first book evolved out of one of those workshops. But I didn’t think of myself as a “real” writer until I got encouragement in a workshop from Dennis Lehane and Karen Joy Fowler, two authors whom I really love. They convinced me that my writing was good and publication was worth pursuing. It’s one thing when your friends say you’re a good writer (after all, they’re a little biased); it’s another thing entirely when two amazing writers who don’t know you say that. They helped me believe that I could actually get published.

Q: What was your favorite book growing up?

A: Anything with a horse in it. I particularly loved all of Walter Farley’s Black Stallion books.

Q: What is your favorite memory from childhood?

A: Long summer afternoons lying around the backyard reading lots and lots of books. I wish I had that much time to read today!

Q: Did/do you have any pets? If so, which was/is your favorite?

A: Now that’s not fair—asking me to pick a favorite pet is like asking a parent to pick a favorite child! I’ve had three dogs, all wonderful in different ways. The dog I have now is a very lovable and cuddly black Lab/shepherd mix named Midnight.

Q: Name three of your favorite authors of all time.

A: Only three? That’s so hard! Okay—how about Walter Farley (my favorite growing up), J. K. Rowling (my favorite now), and C. S. Lewis (for *The Chronicles of Narnia*)—but ask me again tomorrow, and it could change!

Q: What book have you most wanted to read but haven’t yet?

A: All of the *Three Musketeers* books by Alexandre Dumas. I have them but have only read the first two, which I loved.

Q: What book from your childhood changed your life? Adulthood?

A: That’s a really hard question to answer, because I think it’s the cumulative effect of lots and lots of books that make a person. But if I had to pick, I guess the book from childhood that changed my life would be *Go, Dog, Go!* by P. D. Eastman, because it’s the first book I was able to read all by myself, and it started a lifelong love of books. In adulthood, I’d say it was Noah Lukeman’s *How to Write a Great Query Letter*, because it was following his advice that got me my agent and my publisher.

Q: Who is your favorite children’s book character and why?

A: Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter*—she’s smart and loves books and shows that nerdy girls can be heroes too!

Q: If you could live in any book, which would it be?

A: I think it would be Elizabeth von Arnim’s *The Enchanted April*—the setting was just so wonderful. Who wouldn’t want to live in an Italian villa?

Q: If you could have a magical talent (e.g., become invisible or the ability to fly), what would it be?

A: It's a toss-up between time travel and teleportation. Actually, I wouldn't want to physically time travel—I'd like to be able to see events from the past, but from the comfort of the twenty-first century. I'm not terribly keen on actually living in the past, though—I like indoor plumbing and electricity and modern medicine. If someone could invent some sort of telescope that could look backward in time so you could see what really happened way back when, that would be perfect. And teleportation would let me go to all those great places I want to see without having to save up money for an airplane ticket.

Q: What is your favorite food?

A: Chocolate, hands down!

Q: Has it changed since childhood?

A: Only that I used to like milk chocolate better, but now I prefer dark chocolate.

Q: What food did you hate growing up but came to love in adulthood?

A: I refused to eat tomato sauce on my spaghetti when I was a kid—I'd only have salt and butter on my pasta. Now I love tomato sauce.

Q: Who was your hero growing up? Who is it now?

A: My hero growing up was Alec Ramsay, the hero of the Black Stallion stories. He got to do all sorts of cool things with horses that I wished I could do.

Now my hero is my friend Terri, who's a teacher and works with troubled teens—she's awesome! With many of these kids, she may be the first person who's ever treated them decently. I could never do all the things she does.

Q: If there is one thing you could tell your readers about life, what would you say?

A: Be persistent and follow your dreams. It took me ten years to write my first novel and get it published, and I got a lot of rejections (about eighty-five, actually!). If I hadn't persisted, I would never have achieved my dream of getting published.

About the Author

M. P. Barker has more than two decades of experience as a historian, an archivist, and a writer. She has worked as a costumed historical interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, where she got a firsthand taste of nineteenth-century New England rural life by milking cows, mucking out barns, and doing other tasks that helped her bring realism and immediacy to the setting and characters of *A Difficult Boy* and *Mending Horses*.

After Sturbridge, she became an archivist at the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, where she visited a different time and place with every diary, letter, and photograph she cataloged. M. P. Barker's first novel, *A Difficult Boy*, was an IRA Notable Book for a Global Society. Find out more about her at www.mpbarker.net.