Meet the Author

Barbara Park
Grades K-2,3-5

You are a very successful author of children's books. The Junie B. Jones series, for example, has been a national bestseller for many years. When you meet strangers on a plane and they ask what you do for a living, what do you tell them?

BP: I try to talk about almost anything but what I do. There's celebrity attached to being an author that makes me uncomfortable, so I like to avoid it. The way these conversations on airplanes usually go, I try to guide the discussion to something except work. I just dread getting into the, "I'm a writer," conversation, especially when I'm just relaxing on an airplane.

How did your career as a writer begin?

BP: I slumped in the back door. I always was the class clown in high school: the girl that was just cracking kids up in class inappropriately, and was really voted most wimpy in my class. When I realized that I didn't want to teach, I had gotten married and my husband was in the service. We were traveling around, and we started a family I thought, "I'm going to have to get a job. What could I do?" I knew that I could probably be funny on paper if I found a publisher, because I had tried other kinds of writing, like a grocery card from Hallmark and writing for newspapers.

When I finally started writing a middle-grade novel, Operation Dump the Camp (1982), it felt like a perfect fic. It was about two brothers who couldn't stand each other. I had two little boys, so I had some inspiration. I sent it to Knopf and they liked it.

How did the Junie B. Jones series begin?

BP: Janet Schulman, the publisher at Random House, wanted to start a series of easy readers called "Step-Into-Reading," she asked four different authors to write four-book narratives of short chapter books.

Editors note: These initial series were: "Junie B. Jones"

by Barbara Park; "Magic Tree House" by Mary Pope Osborne; "Nate the Great" by Marjorie Sharmat, and "Marvin Redpost" by Louis Sachar.

By the time Random House invited me to write "Junie B. Jones," I had published about ten middle-grade novels, including Skinnybones (1982) and The Kid in the Red Jacket (1988). Janet gave us the reading level, told us how long the books had to be, and then gave us freedom by saying, "Go with it."

There was some worry about whether my dry sense of humor would translate to first and second graders. I got around this by putting myself into the head of a five-year-old girl. I would speak exactly like she would, which means that I would have trouble with the language and trouble with keeping my personality nested in, as I did at that age. Junie B. Jones was born.

How do you inhabit the mindset of your young characters in your writing?

BP: Teachers will ask, "How do you know what children are thinking when they are eight or ten or six?" Apparently, I just didn't mature. It's just a question of putting myself in a particular age and in a particular position.

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When I was writing about Molly Vera Thompson, a six-year-old
characters from The Kid or the Kid Jacker. I just reduced life to the simplest common denominator. That age group doesn’t have all the rules yet. I tried to look at the problems that Molly had to face with clear, simple eyes. I certainly wasn’t as over the top as Junie when I was her age. But in best grade, I was sent to the principal for oiling in class. I always had something to say that I thought really needed to be said right at that moment. My father was the president of our board of education, so that didn’t go over particularly well...

Your books are very human. Junie is a girl who makes mistakes—in her actions, her language, and her life, because she’s five. How do readers respond to her humanity?

BP: This is a little girl whose personality is too strong for her age. Kids see that Junie is a lot of control, and they love that. She’s also a lot like other kids. That’s where you get the humor. I got a great letter from a girl who said, “We know that Junie isn’t real, but could she come to our school?” That spoke to well to the idea that she’s fictional, yet should be in a real classroom.

Do the situations that Junie encounters, and their resolutions, convey any kind of moral for your readers?

BP: Junie B.’s problems are everyday issues that all kids have to deal with. These include dealing with other kids and being embarrassed, afraid, hurt, and scared to speak in front of somebody. They are essentially just daily life hitting her from all angles.

I try really hard not to set a moral. The situations work out as they work out. Sometimes Junie does the wrong thing, and she has to pay the price. I think that teachers often try too hard to teach a lesson with literature. And for me, that’s not what I see with my books. I would like to see a story discussed, but not with any kind of heavy moral or lesson learned because I don’t believe it’s the purpose of fictional characters to teach you anything.

That’s interesting in light of a public debate over Junie’s incorrect grammar, which was spotlighted in a 2007 New York Times article by Anna Jane Grossman, “Is Junie B. Jones Talking Trash?” (Read it at www.teachingbooks.net/JunieBNY/Times.)

BP: I have been fighting a battle about Junie’s imperfect grammar with a small segment of the readership for a very long time. The New York Times reporter seemed to have friends who loved the books and other friends who thought they were decrepit to their kids. I would like to raise two things on this topic. One, I have never received a letter from a disgruntled parent telling me that my books lowered expectations for society’s children. The second point concerns the letters I get complaining that Junie does not speak the Queen’s English. They say, “How dare I write books in which a character misspeaks?” Well, never once has one of those letters been grammatically correct. I love it.

A librarian and linguist, Jel Pattan, wrote a paper on Junie B. Jones called “You are not the Boss of My Words,” and it was published in Children and Libraries in 2005. She researched Junie speak and found that Junie really is getting language right. The things that Junie’s missing are all of the exceptions in our language, so in her trend she is following almost every single rule.

Despite the controversy over Junie’s grammar, the “Junie B. Jones” books are often used for educational purposes. Will you share some examples of how teachers successfully incorporate them into the curriculum?

BP: Teachers are amazing allies of this series. There is a school in Phoenix called the Cerrington Elementary School that has a huge number of ESL students. One of the second graders used Junie B. to help motivate students who couldn’t read.

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A teacher in Georgia had a student in the lowest reading group. She started reading Junior B. in the classroom and this piqued this student's interest. His reading improved, and by the end of the year he started getting in trouble because he was missing the books during math.

I called the teacher and asked her if he would be embarrassed if I dedicated a book to him. She told me that he had moved, but she said, "I will guarantee you that this will be one of the highlights of his boy's life." So I did. The next year, his old school had him back to sign copies of the book.

I also heard that the books were going to be published in English in reprints in Indonesia with the incorrect words circled, so that they would be used as English teaching tools.

Junior has gone from kindergarten to first grade over the course of the series, with the 2001 arrival of the "Junior B., First Grader" series. How has she changed?

BP: She has better command of the language than she did in kindergarten. She doesn't say "runny" or "bridal" or "drowny" anymore. She's trying harder to stay in her seat now. She doesn't sit as much as she used to. I like her down and make sure that sometimes she speaks more correctly. Sometimes she uses and omits the same words. She'll say "exactly" and will say "very." The "Junior B. Jones" books attract a large readership among boys. What do you suppose makes her appealing to them?

BP: Junior B. is not really a girly girl. I try to keep her problems generic. There's an occasional book in which she's a bridesmaid or a flower girl. Other than that, I could almost call her "Johnny B. Jones" and most of the books wouldn't change drastically.

The Kid in the Red Jacket, a middle-grade novel, is about Howard Jecser—a boy who has to adjust to a new environment when his family moves across the country. What drew you to this topic?

BP: We live in a mobile society, and many families move around a lot. Fathers do kids a disservice to kids who grow up in the service. Our family relocated often and we moved the kids to different schools. One of the most difficult things I learned a child has to do is to walk into that classroom as the new kid. I had a lot of fun writing The Kid in the Red Jacket, particularly with book character of Molly Vera Thompson, the little girl who tries to be friends with Howard. There's nothing that she won't say. It's very freeing to write a character like that. She inspired me to have Junior B. do the same thing, she is really Junior's prototype.

Two of your other middle-grade novels, The Graduation of Jake Moon (2000) and Mick Harte Was Here (1995), involve kids who are facing very serious problems.

BP: Mick Harte Was Here is about a girl who has lost her brother in a lake accident, and The Graduation of Jake Moon follows a boy's gradualist through his descent into Alzheimer's disease. Those are deep issues, and those two books are very close to my heart. Jake Moon has been raised by his grandfather and his mother, and I put Jake at that sensitive early teen age where everything means something to him. That bond between a boy and a grandfather is so beautiful, and then you see it shrivel. Jake gets sad, and then he steps up. Budders (1985), which is now out of print, is about a very sweet girl, Dinah, who is nice to everybody, but always wants to be in the popular crowd. She goes to camp, revives herself, and does something extremely crude to a very nice girl just to stay in the cool group. At the end, Dinah feels horrible and tries to apologize. The other girl refuses to forgive her, I got a lot of flack from teachers for that. But I feel like life is like that sometimes.
One of your newest projects, the picture book *Mad! There's Nothing to Do Here!* (2008), is written from the perspective of a child in heaven. How did this book come about?

**BP:** My boys were born in the 1970s, before the sonogram was invented. So my pregnancies were just show me my and my weight and my bones and pains. I never imagined what was going on inside. My daughter-in-law invited me to the sonogram of my first grandson. She was pointing out baby parts. “Oh, look. There’s his little elbow.” I was so fascinated, but I was mostly concerned that this baby seemed so bored. I looked at her belly and thought, “You’re just in there doing nothing. Tomorrow you’ll be doing nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. And that’s going to go on for months.” If this had been my own child I probably would have swallowed a rat or a duck so it would have something to play with. I wrote a poem for my daughter-in-law’s baby shower that began, “What’s a baby to do in a womb with no view.” When I read the poem to my editor, she said, “That’s a picture book.”

What do you like to tell students who want to write?

**BP:** The main thing is that writing is just a job. For me, it’s not about celebrity. It’s a job and it’s attainable if someone really wants it and is good at it. Sometimes kids really want to write, but they give up because it just looks like they can’t do it or it’s too exclusive or a club.

I couldn’t be a neurosurgeon.

So I tell students that you have to have a realistic sense of what your talents are, but you don’t necessarily have to approach it with the idea that you were touched by the hand of God to do this. I want to take the mystique out of professionalism for them.

What do you like to tell teachers?

**BP:** “Thank you.” Teachers are the ones in the trenches, and they really make a difference. They are my heroes.

What is a typical workday for you?

**BP:** I need some kind of a big monster to scare me into the office. Usually it’s my room, and I’m still in my pajamas trying to figure out what else I can do not to get dressed and act like I’m going to work. I check my e-mail. And then, if I’m working on a project, I turn it on and I look at it, and then I turn it off. Then I think of all the things that I have to do—rather than sit down and work. Taking out the trash. Brushing the dog’s teeth. I finally pull myself into the room and sit down. Once the work starts, it flows.

What do you do when you get stuck?

**BP:** I get out. There’s no such thing as writer’s block. It’s there all the time. I brainstorm with my family and my editor. I get a lot of ideas in the shower or the tub. I don’t give myself a few days for it to come out, because that’s not how it happens with me.

I do have this great luxury of being able to write funny. It puts me in a good mood, and I will often laugh at a lot of things that I write.

For more on the Josie B. Jones books, go to www.randomhouse.com/kids/josieb/books/books.html.

For more on Barbara Park’s other books, go to www.randomhouse.com/kids/juniekatishley/elderbooks.html.

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