

• Meet the Author •

Sarah Martin Busse and Jacqueline Briggs Martin

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



Photo from sarahbusse.com

Sarah Martin Busse is the co-editor of the poetry magazine *Verse Wisconsin*, and the author of two chapbooks: *Quiver* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2009) and *Given These Magics* (Finishing Line Press, 2010). She is the co-author of a picture book, *Banjo Granny* (Houghton Mifflin 2006). Sarah received her MFA in Creative Writing and Literature from Bennington's Writing Seminars. She lives with her husband and two children in Madison, Wisconsin.

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. degree from Wellesley College, and an M.A. in Child Development from the University of Minnesota.

Martin has published sixteen books for children. Her picture book biography of a self-taught scientist—*Snowflake Bentley*, illustrated by Mary Azarian (Houghton Mifflin, 1998)—was awarded the 1999 Caldecott medal by the American Library Association. *The Lamp, the Ice, and the Boat Called Fish* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001) was named an ALA Notable Book. *On Sand Island* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) was named to Publishers Weekly's "Best Books of the Year" list. *The Chiru Of High Tibet*, a nonfiction story for which Martin traveled to Tibet, will be published in October, 2010 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Jacqueline Briggs Martin began writing books for children because of her family's positive experiences with reading. "We read stories every day when my children were young," she has said. "And I decided I would like to write books that children and parents could enjoy together."

Jacqueline Briggs Martin and her husband, Richard, live in Mount Vernon, Iowa.

This lyrical picture book reads like both a tall tale and a family story oft-retold. Because of your mother-daughter relationship, I imagine that it is



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some of both. What was the inspiration for this book?

JBM: When my grandson Owen was a baby, he and his family lived in California. His "Granny" (me) lived in Iowa. One day Sarah called and said that Owen, who was about 4 months old, was loving bluegrass music and was just bouncing to it. I thought, "I have got to see that baby." But I could not leave at that time to see him. So I imagined a granny just going out her front door and walking west to California.

What is the family tie to music in general and to bluegrass in particular?

SMB: There was a lot of music in the house when my brother and I were growing up. We were both expected to take piano lessons as long as we lived at home and to play an instrument in the band. Practicing was not an option—it was a requirement! My dad,

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who was the musical force in the house, played drums, piano, vibraphone, and at some points, guitar and trumpet. He's now a professional jazz musician with the Eddie Piccard Quartet, in Cedar Rapids.

As for bluegrass—I admit I didn't know a lot about bluegrass until I heard Dolly Parton's "Little Sparrow" (that was the song that made Owen smile so much). I fell in love with that CD and began learning as much as I could about bluegrass and "new grass." I love music that emphasizes the human and acoustic—just someone playing a guitar or a banjo, and singing. I think I love it partly because it is so portable. You can have music like that anywhere, any time.

How did the two of you settle on the tall-tale aspects of this 'hero's journey' story? Did you imagine from the outset that Granny and her music would be larger than life, or did that aspect of the story develop in the inevitable layering a manuscript undergoes over time?

JBM/SMB: There was of course some layering. But the original conception of a granny who could walk from the Midwest to California carrying only a banjo case made the story a tall-tale from the outset.

One of the absolute charms of this story is how Granny conquers each of the three natural impediments that keep her away from her grandbaby Owen. Did you

know from the start that you would use this pattern of three, or did you try other organizational structures before you landed on this perfect choice?

JBM: The geography of Granny's walk really helped with this. It is possible to walk—with not too much zig-zagging—from Iowa to California and cross a river (the Missouri), some mountains (the Rocky Mountains), and a desert (the Mojave). But even with another mountain range or two I think we would have stuck to the pattern of three. It's just so satisfying in this story.

SMB: The pattern of three is found in so many folk and fairy tales. It seems very natural in a story like this.

Readers will be fascinated to hear how the two of you work together. Is the combining of two authorial sensibilities seamless with you two, or do you have to discuss and compromise and sometimes toss coins to see whose idea or turn of phrase will win out? Tell us more about your process.

JBM: Since I'm the one who plays around with children's books, I often write something and send it to Sarah. She makes comments, changes, additions, and sends it back. We most often agree and we seem to forget about the times we didn't agree. If we can't decide which is a better turn of phrase, we live with it for a while. One always seems to emerge as the better choice.

SMB: I feel most of my best contributions are structural

in nature, looking at which paragraphs and which episodes don't yet fit, where the flow isn't right...As a poet, my ear for language is tuned differently than Mom's, and I've learned it's best to defer to her for how to phrase something. For one thing, she's very aware that we'll be collaborating with an illustrator, and I tend to forget that!

How can readers learn more about each of you and your books?

JBM: I have published a number of children's books and will be publishing with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt *The Chiru of High Tibet* in October, 2010. Sarah is a poet and has published two poetry chapbooks—*Quiver* and *Given These Magics*. She is also the co-editor of a poetry magazine, both in print and online, titled *Verse Wisconsin*. For those who would like to know more about us, we have websites:

<http://www.sarahbusse.com>

<http://www.jacquelinebriggsmartin.com>

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of eleven picture books, most recently No T. Rex in the Library! (McElderry, 2010) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

