

# • Meet the Author •

## Mary Casanova

Grades  
K-2



Mary Casanova is the author of more than thirty books, ranging from picture books (including *One-Dog Sleigh*) to her YA novel (*Frozen*), as well as books for American Girl and two resulting movies: *Chrissa Stands Strong* and *McKenna Shoots for the Stars*. Once a reluctant reader and a “can’t-sit-still” kind of kid, Mary is passionate about writing “stories that matter and books that kids can’t put down.” Her awards include the ALA Notable, *Parent’s Choice Gold Award*, and *Booklist Editor’s Choice*, in addition to numerous state reading list awards. When she’s not on the road for research or speaking engagements, Mary loves

exploring the woods in northern Minnesota with her husband, Charlie, and their horses and dogs.

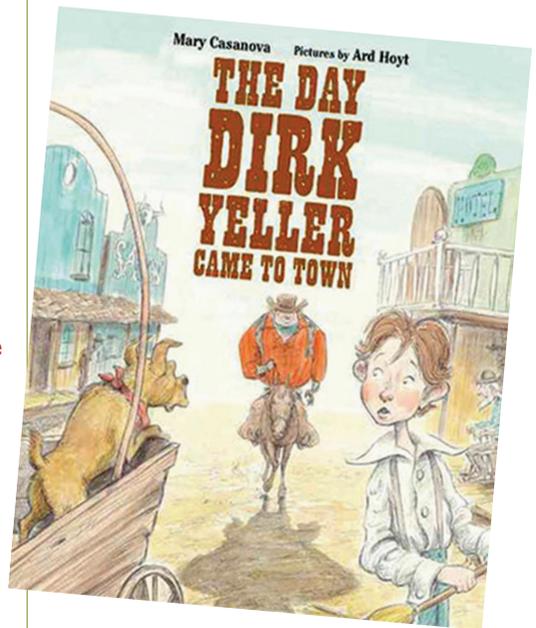
**Wow! *The Day Dirk Yeller Came to Town* is quite a romp and a very different genre for you—an original tall tale. Tell us how you came to write this story.**

**MC:** I woke up at midnight with the opening lines in my head: *The day Dirk Yeller came to town, the wind curled its lip, cattle quit lowin’ and tumbleweeds stopped tumblin’ along.* Though I usually try to go back to sleep, this time I got up and wrote down the words. In the morning, when I read what I’d written, the rest of the story quickly followed. Some stories come as gifts, and this was one of those.

**Was Sam always your narrator, or at what point did his story and his voice arise in the creation or revision of this manuscript?**

**MC:** I found Sam in the revision process. (Yes, even “gift” stories require revision!) I wanted a younger character to narrate this story—someone who could

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com)).



identify with Dirk’s restless ways. Someone, like Sam, whose curiosity at times gets him in trouble, but who, like Dirk, is basically good at heart. Both are characters who are misunderstood at times.

**What makes tall-tale writing different for you as a writer and different for the child reader as compared to a more traditional picture book?**

**MC:** Dirk’s larger-than-life story was a blast to write. In tall tales there are no limits to your imagination as a writer; that’s what makes these stories so fun for readers, too.

**You have published so many different kinds of books, from a Chinese folktale to humorous picture books, to middle-grade and young adult novels. Talk a bit about how the writing experience is different for each and your favorite aspects of each type of writing.**

**MC:** More than the differences, I find myself thinking about how similar my writing process is, whether it's for a picture book or a novel. I pay attention to a concept or an aspect of a story that calls to me. It's almost a physical feeling. A faint electric charge, if you will. Excitement. Enthusiasm. Intrigue. I try to listen for the story that seems to want to be told. I start to write, and in the process of writing and revising, I listen to my inner editor. I listen to the nudges and hunches that guide me toward making the story as strong and true as possible. The biggest difference between a shorter piece and a longer piece is how much time it takes me to finish the work and how much of my brain the story requires for processing. An historical novel requires lots of brain space, whereas a picture book fits into my head a bit more easily.

**Some of your novels are American Girl books. Can you tell us about that experience and how it differs from publishing traditional trade novels?**

**MC:** American Girl approaches me with an initial concept regarding a possible character and story. For

Chrissa, a girl struggles with bullying while on a swim team. For McKenna, a talented gymnast struggles at school with reading. My goal, after learning about their wishes for a character, is to find a way to make the story my own. For Chrissa, I tapped into my own experiences with being bullied, as well as my experience as a parent when my own children dealt with this issue. Plus, though I wasn't a competitive swimmer, I grew up on a lake and loved water.

For McKenna, I knew I would have to do extra research about gymnastics. With permission, I shadowed a young gymnast at her practices and competitions as part of learning more about the sport. I could easily identify with a character who might struggle with reading, since I struggled in elementary school as well. If I can find a way to empathize with a character so that I truly care, then stories are likely to ring true for readers.

**Were you always interested in writing for children? How have your original plan and vision grown and changed as your career has progressed?**

**MC:** I grew up in a family of ten kids. Writing, I discovered in high school, was a way for me to have a voice. That's when the dream took hold of becoming a published writer someday. I always assumed I would one day write a big, fat novel for adults. Not until I was thirty-two, when I read *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, did

I consider writing for young readers. I knew I'd found my niche. I never dreamed, however, that I would write so many books! I was certain with my first book, *Moose Tracks* (republished in the fall of 2013 by the University of Minnesota Press), that I had used up all of my good ideas. Each book that followed has been an adventure—a discovery that creativity is a bottomless well.

**How can readers learn more about you and your other books?**

**MC:** I speak at schools and conferences around the country. Plus I am online. Website: [www.marycasanova.com](http://www.marycasanova.com)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/mary.casanova.fan.page](http://www.facebook.com/mary.casanova.fan.page)

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*Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is both an author and a career library media specialist. Her credits include, among nineteen picture books, the 2013 Caldecott Honor Book One Cool Friend, But I Read It on the Internet! (Upstart, 2013), and Just Like My Papa (Hyperion, 2013). She has also authored many professional books and articles. Visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com) or e-mail her at [tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com](mailto:tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com).*

