

Author Interview: Susan Patron, All You Need is Love

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Susan Patron at the 2007 American Library Association banquet in Washington, DC, just after giving her acceptance speech for the Newbery Award.

The Children's Book Review proudly presents an interview with Newbery award-winning author Susan Patron. After recently reviewing [The Higher Power of Lucky](#) and [Lucky Breaks](#), I received a very gracious thank you note from Susan, herself. I couldn't resist asking for the opportunity to e-mail her a few questions.

Bianca: We'd love to hear about your path to becoming a published author – a Newbery award-winning author at that – the trials and tribulations of Susan Patron. Did you always aspire to be an author?



Susan: I wanted to be a writer ever since discovering [Charlotte's Web](#) at around age 8, and librarianship turned out to be a really good back-up plan. As a

specialist in service to children, I was immersed in the literature and in storytelling, which is wonderful background for anyone interested in the field. And for years I attended [SCBWI](#) conferences in my librarian disguise. For a long time I was afraid to tell anyone about my secret desire; I was doing a lot of writing despite being so afraid of rejection that I didn't submit to publishers. Finally I sent out a picture book manuscript, [Burgoo Stew](#), and after several houses turned it down the legendary editor Richard Jackson published it in 1991. Dick went on to edit my three other picture books, a chapter book ([Maybe Yes, Maybe No, Maybe Maybe](#)) and the first novel in the "[Lucky/Hard Pan](#)" trilogy, which won the Newbery in 2007 just after he announced his retirement.

Bianca: What do you think has influenced your writing the most, personal experiences or your work as a librarian?

Susan: Well, it's not as if I would take off my personal life like a selkie's skin and hang it on a peg during the time I did librarian work. It all melds together—the work as a librarian, personal reading, professional reading, experiences of everyday life, overheard conversations, thinking about subjects like faith or love or death, endless musing about 'what if?'—all of it blending into a kind of life stew into which I dip a ladle to discover the story that wants to be written.

Bianca: Your writing is contemporary and descriptive. From where do you draw your inspiration? Do you have a special place that you like to be when you write? Is there a perfect time in the day where your creative juices flow more readily?

Susan: My out-of-print "[Billy Que](#)" picture book trilogy evolved from library storytime experiences, from the oral tradition of folklore; they're meant to be read aloud. The "Lucky" trilogy began with the setting, a fictional tiny town in the Eastern Sierras of California, where my husband and I have vacationed for years. You can see photos of my writing cabin (a former shack) at my website, www.susanpatron.com. This tiny cabin is where I am most happy and productive, but I also write at home in Los Angeles. I've developed a routine of writing every morning and most afternoons, whether I feel inspired or not.

Bianca: After the controversial eruption of the media over the use of the word scrotum in *The Higher Power of Lucky*, what would you say you took away personally from the experience?

Susan: Writers must never fear words; it would be like a surgeon being afraid of a scalpel. We need to use them with precision, and with enormous respect for the sensibilities and intelligence of our readers. But if we fear controversy, if we fear telling the deep truths, our writing will be weaker and much less compelling.

Bianca: Do you think people were surprised to see the word scrotum reappear in its successor, *Lucky Breaks*?

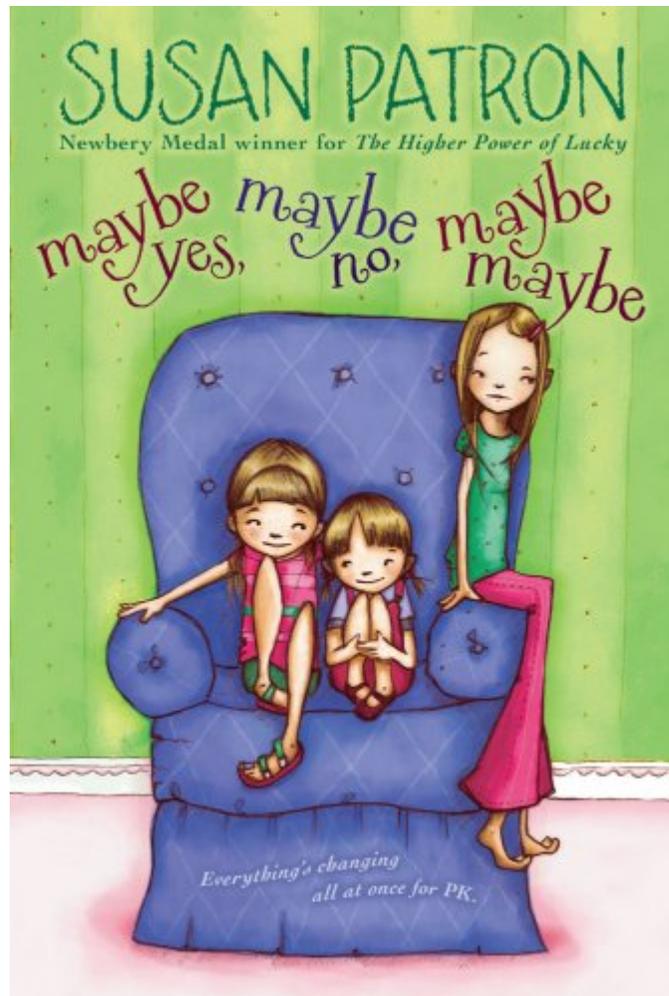
Susan: Several reviewers mentioned it, which surprised me. I figured that anyone who survived the experience of reading the name of a body part in [The Higher Power of Lucky](#) would be able to weather its reappearance in the sequel. So in [Lucky Breaks](#) I was treating it as the useful, non-sexualized, descriptive word it is. To me, these books are about the redeeming power of love; they're about a young girl growing up in a challenging environment and trying to figure out how the world works. They are not "about" the word scrotum and they were never intended to be controversial.



Photographed at Hicklebee's Book Store in California during a book tour after the publication of *LUCKY BREAKS* in March 2009.

Bianca: *Maybe Yes, Maybe No, Maybe Maybe* is on my to-be-read pile. Can you give me the scoop on what to expect?

Susan: My younger sister and I were chatting with my editor and she told him our old family story: when we were little, my job was to give Georgia her nightly bath. I would determine if she was clean enough to get out of the tub by the degree to which her fingers and toes were wrinkled. "Go write that story," Dick Jackson said to me. "Not as a picture book; as a novel." I'd never written a novel and hadn't a clue how to do it, so I just pretended I was telling a story orally. Kind of tricked myself into doing it. The book was issued in a new paperback edition earlier this year, with terrific art by Abigail Halpin. And even beyond the bathtub bits, a good part of it is autobiographical.



Bianca: Could you tell us about the joys and hardships of being a librarian?

Susan: I'd call it one of the world's truly noble professions. For me it was all about connecting kids with books, which can be very hard work and extraordinarily gratifying when we succeed. And librarians are on the front lines, defending freedom of speech and the freedom to read. In a profound way, this anchors our society and our culture and you can go home every day feeling that in some way you're part of a solution. On the other hand, libraries are always one of the first places where budgets are cut, services are abridged, hours are shortened, raises aren't given. Librarians are very, very dedicated people.

Bianca: You're an extraordinary writer. But aside from this, what is your higher power, or the higher power you are reaching for?

Susan: The Beatles said it: All you need is love.