

# MARY CALHOUN

**"WHEN YOU LIKE TO WRITE,  
THAT'S JUST THE BEST  
THING IN THE WORLD TO DO"**

**BY LISA HARLEY AND  
POLLY THORNTON**



Mary Wilkins has established herself as Mary Calhoun, author of many well-known childrens' books such as **KATIE JOHN**, **WITCH OF HISSING HILL** and **CROSS COUNTRY CAT**. She first started writing articles and science fiction then children's stories. She has been writing for the last thirty years. In these writings she has created fantasies and visions for many youngsters to read and enjoy.

When we (Polly and Lisa) went to interview Mary Calhoun we asked her about her life and the things that inspired her to become a writer.

"I knew I wanted to be a writer when I grew up. I felt it was an impossible dream because I have such a respect for writers. It seemed like such a leap from my childish dreams. I read a lot of plays in high school, and I admired playwrights very much, although I didn't think I could ever do that. In fact, I had a short period when I thought I would like to be an astronomer or a psychiatrist, but I wasn't very good in either science or math.

"In those days a girl was expected to get married, and if she didn't she was a real loser. We were all indoctrinated that way. I always had in the back of my mind, 'what could I do and be a married woman and a mother at the same time?'

"After college, I went to work on the Omaha World Herald as the womens' feature writer. I enjoyed that very much. I did all kinds of reporting from society news, to whatever features I could think up. I remember one beautiful spring day, when I wanted to get out of the office. I rode the bus all over Omaha. Later I wrote an article about what people were doing on that beautiful spring day. Once, I interviewed a lady champion hog caller; another time I did a story on Fred Astaire's mother. After the newspaper work I was doing a lot of freelancing, ranging from fiction to jokes. At that time I wasn't doing any writing for children, although I was doing some storytelling.

"During the early fifties I was writing some science fiction, and occasionally I would get an encouraging rejection note from an editor. Then I started telling stories to my boys and saw they really enjoyed it. I wrote some of those stories down, and that's when I found that I really enjoyed writing for children. Most everyone has to put in a period of finding what it is that they like to write. Until a person finds what they like to write, they usually go through a period of rejections. I was helped some because I'd been through journalism school and was involved with different writers who had been there and had survived the rejections. There was a certain encouragement in knowing that if you just hung



in there long enough and sharpened your abilities, eventually there would be a winner that would sell.

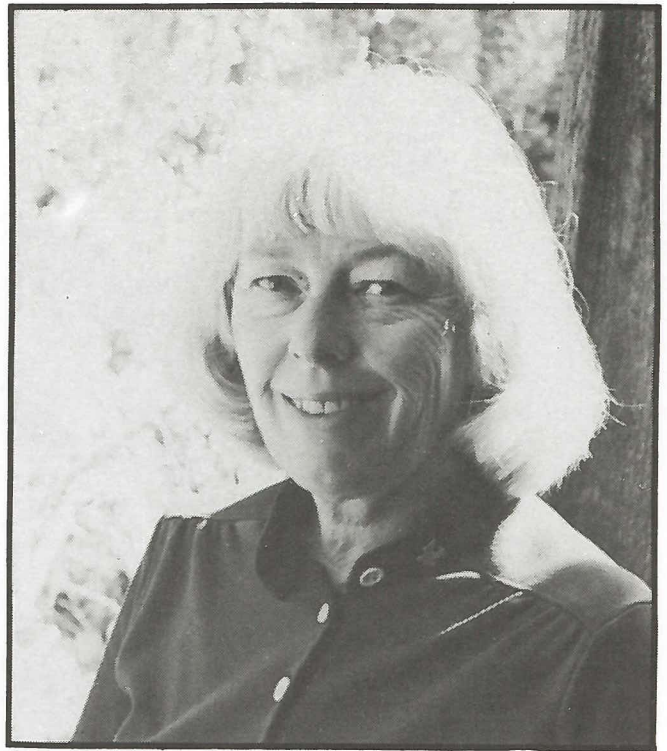
"The first book I sold was **MAKING THE MISSISSIPPI SHOUT**, which was published in 1957. I was so excited when the acceptance letter came that I ran next door to my neighbor waving the letter in the air. Before I could tell her what it was about, I started to faint and had to sit down on the floor and put my head down."

After hearing Mary tell us about her feelings of success that she experienced on her first publication, we also wanted to know about Mary's child, teen and adult life. She told us about some of her earliest memories.

"I was born August 3, 1926, in Keokuk, Iowa. When I was a child, we were in the Depression. I wasn't hungry, but I was aware of the Depression. We rented out rooms in our house for needed money. My grandmother raised chickens and sold eggs. I lived in a town of about 14,000, in a big brick house that my great-grandfather built. We owned a quarter of a block so we had a garden, orchard and chickens.

"I went to George Washington Elementary school. There were six grades, each classroom complete with a cloakroom corridor. There was also a kindergarten in the basement (I had only two months of kindergarten because when I was that age, we were in Florida). Just before they tore down my elementary school last summer, I decided to take a look around at the old rooms, which were dusty and rattly with a few old desks sitting around. They were getting ready to auction off a few things, so I just made my little lonely pilgrimage to every classroom. That really brought back memories.

"I enjoyed school and I enjoyed the process of studying and learning. I never felt very popular with the kids, though by the time I was in the fifth or sixth grade there was one boy Dick, Dickie we called him, whom I competed with a lot. We thought we were boyfriend and girlfriend in a

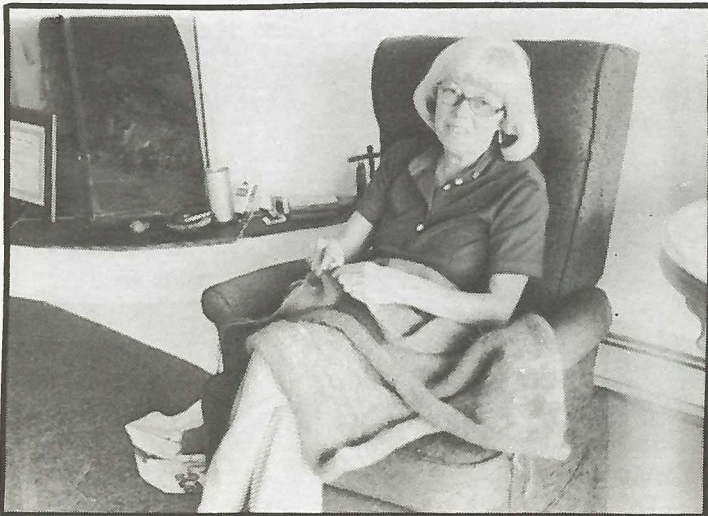


**"I LOVE THE OUTDOORS"**

mild sort of way.

"I loved to swim, still do. I was always in some kind of swim program throughout my school years. Music was also very important to me. When I was in the seventh grade I was playing the violin and the piano. I enjoyed drama, debate and speech too. I have always loved to read. When I was in the eighth grade, my English teacher asked me what my favorite book was. I said, 'Nancy Drew.' I think she was disgusted with me because she thought I should read something better. High school was hard for me, because I felt unpopular with the other kids. I was not interested in a lot of the things that they were interested in. I concentrated more on the subjects that I was studying. I don't mean that I didn't try to have friends, and I did date, but I just didn't feel very successful as a high school kid.

"From 1944 to 1948, I went to the University of Iowa. First I majored in English, then after a year and a half I switched to journalism and graduated with a degree in journalism. I became engrossed in working on the college newspaper (The Daily Iowan) and then in working as an Iowa City news correspondent. At the time I went to college, World War II was still going on. When I was a freshman there were very few guys on campus. All I did that year was study. There wasn't much else to do with no guys around. Then I went out with and became engaged to this Navy Air Corp. cadet and that changed the scene. We were all very concerned about the war. I remember when President Roosevelt died how we wept and wept. I had never really known



**"KNITTING HELPS ME THINK"**





### IN ONE OF MARY'S THINKING PLACES

any other president; he had been elected in 1932. I thought, 'Here we are in a war, we've lost a leader; what will we do?!' Then when the war ended in 1945, there were guys all over the campus, and the dating situation was much improved."

Mary married Frank Calhoun in September, 1948. They both worked as newspaper, reporter-photographers. Mary gave birth to two boys. After Frank's death, Mary became the wife of Leon Wilkins, an Episcopal priest. They bought land in Routt County and when Leon had the opportunity to become priest of St. Paul's Church, both jumped at the chance to relocate here. Mary spoke with us about her enthusiasm of living in this area.

"This is my town. I'm a chicken alpine skier, but I love to cross-country ski. At one time we lived at the Pine Grove apartments, and I skied behind there. They're now making the interchange there. It was a nice hill to practice on, an easy one for a chicken skier. One day I came in, body glowing and feeling good, and there was my blue-eyed cat sitting like a pillow on the sofa. I said, 'Kitty, you ought to be outdoors; go out and get on the cross-country skis. You would look so beautiful on the snowy landscape. You would be a cross-country cat. And then I thought, 'That sounds like a book title, **CROSS COUNTRY CAT.**' I didn't do anything with it for quite a while and then I thought, 'Oh, that's silly, you couldn't really have a cat on skis.'

"Later I was visiting the Cherry Creek schools, a third grade class, and the kids asked if

while living in Steamboat I had ever written about skiing? I said no, but told them that I had a title and told them about the cat. They said, 'Write it, write it!' So I came home and started writing. See, a writer thinks, how could it happen? And what if? So I thought, 'Why would a cat be on skis?' Then the story began to develop."

As Mary talked about the inspiration for a story we were intrigued and wanted her to tell us more about how her books originated, and how they came to reach a finished product.

"Erick Ingraham, my illustrator for **CROSS COUNTRY CAT** and **HOT AIR HENRY**, is a master artist. He lives in Pennsylvania, so he came out here to see what Colorado was like. I showed him where I ski, the mountain cabins, and where all my thinking occurred. Both of us are very careful about details. In a fantasy story I have to work harder for the detail to be true enough for the reader to believe it.

"Erick received the 1979 honor book (runner-up) award for illustration in the Boston Globe-Horn Book awards. I have received for the writing of **CROSS COUNTRY CAT** the 1980 Golden Kite Honor award from the Society of Children's Book Writers which is a national organization."

"Many of my best books stem from my own emotions, real life situations. **OWNSELF** is about a girl trying to feel worthwhile when she's one of seven kids, she's not getting much attention from her parents. She particularly wants the attention and approval of her father, which she had when she was small, but no longer has. She summons up a fairy through a spell that she finds in a Welsh folk lore book. I deliberately left it up to the reader to decide whether the fairy was a separate entity or the spirit of her ownself. The impetus of this story was grief over my mother's death. In a way I wanted to rewrite my mother's life. She was one of nine children and had a problem with her father. Mother would



**CATS CAN'T REALLY SKI, CAN THEY??**





## PLANNING "DEPEND ON KATIE JOHN"

laugh about it, yet she really believed in fairies till the day she died.

"The **KATIE JOHN** books are about the old house in which I grew up. I loved this old house so much that I wanted to write about it. The house was the first character in these stories, and later the character "Katie John" developed. I try to stay in touch with children and be around them a lot. Sometimes my ideas come from what I observe the kids thinking about and what they are interested in. It's research in a way. I do folktale classes with fifth-graders every winter. At the time I was writing a new **KATIE JOHN** book, (**KATIE JOHN AND HEATHCLIFF**) Katie gets her ears pierced. So I asked the fifth grade girls, 'How did it feel?; How was it done?; Why did you have it done?; How old were you?; Did you have it done because you wanted a boy's attention?; etc. Research!"

"One of my first witch books was **WOBBLE, THE WITCH CAT**. I've always loved Halloween. Halloween is a celebration of the imagination, a time when the imagination runs wild. I'm well aware from my studies in folklore of the background origins of Halloween, black magic and so on. The closest I have come to being involved with black magic was in a book called **THE WHITE WITCH OF KYNANCE**. The book is about white witchcraft in Cornwall during the 16th century. A white witch is a village-healing woman, using herbs and charms to heal. But the white witch may slip over into black witchcraft, out of a desire for power.

Travel and promotion are often a big part of an author's life. Mary spoke about this facet of writing. "I love to travel. We've been to England three times (my husband and I). I wish we could go every year. Some of my favorite books are English novels. The last time we were in England, my husband traded churches with an English clergyman for six weeks. I don't travel near as much as I like. Traveling is expensive, and children's book writers aren't asked to do promotion tours very often.

"Over the last few years one of the things that children's book writers do, is visit schools. It is very hard work. We are expected to give 24 hours of the day. There are times I can't even get away to take a break. I like the contact with the kids; I get a lot out of that. But it is nerve wracking, to be the focus of every one's attention. A writer is really a private person, even as a newspaper reporter, we're looking at the other person; they're not looking at us. I am used to being alone a lot. Then, when suddenly I find myself surrounded by masses of people and little children, I find it very draining. I won't quit doing it, but I'm not going to do it every week.

"Once after one of my visits, I received a letter from a student who wrote an inspirational story. That made me feel it was all worthwhile. I hope that funds will always be available for sponsoring writers to visit schools, like Right to Read, and the International Reading Association—there are quite a few that do this."

Creating a book requires a lot more than just the writing. We asked Mary to tell us about the editing, publishing, copyrighting and selling of her books.

"After I have finished a book I go over it with a fine tooth comb. I try to take out all trite phrases as well as be aware of poor wording, spelling, and punctuation. What goes to the editor sometimes may come back with a lot of revision suggestions. I used to be disturbed by editing, but now I realize if I have a good editor, he/she can see things that I missed. My rule of thumb is if I can see how a suggestion will improve my



LISA AND POLLY





## TURNING FIRST SHOVELFULS FOR THE NEW RANGELY LIBRARY

book, then I'll go along with the suggestion. If I can't see how it'll improve my book, then I send it to another editor. As a result of this I have five different publishers.

Near the end of the interview, we asked Mary what kind of advice she would give to beginning writers, "Do a lot of writing and reading, for pleasure. Have a good time with writing. Read the **WRITER MAGAZINE** and the **WRITER'S DIGEST MONTHLY**, both can help with the marketing aspect of writing. For your personal use, keep file cards. On those cards list the titles, number of words, the date and to whom you sent the article or book to. When a response comes back, note whether it has been accepted or rejected. If it has been rejected, send the book to someone else. Several of my books have been rejected by one publisher and accepted by another."

At the conclusion of this story we felt we had gained a great insight into the life of Mary Calhoun, writer and person. Her writings have made many hours of interesting reading, and, we hope that our **Three Wire Winter** readers will enjoy reading her books even more after knowing about the person who wrote them. As we

were leaving Mary added, "I wish you lots of happiness with your writing. When you like to write, that's just the best thing in the world to do."

