



Pam Muñoz Ryan

Author Interview
PAINT THE WIND

Did you ride or spend time around horses when you were a child?

Only vicariously. As a young girl, I was obsessive about books and I still remember reading Marguerite Henry's *King of the Wind*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, and *Justin Morgan Had a Horse*. Many of my friends collected Breyer horses, which I loved but couldn't afford. One of my friends owned a horse and I can still remember going out to the corral behind her house to pet it. The horse world fascinated me. But it was so far removed from my everyday (and beyond my family's financial means), that it never occurred to me to ask for riding lessons.

What classic horse stories did you read (or reread) as you prepared to write *Paint the Wind*?

I reread dozens of children's and adult classic horse stories, and contemporary ones as well. I made a list of over thirty titles and to my surprise, discovered that most featured a boy and a horse: *The Red Pony*, *King of the Wind*, *The Black Stallion*, *My Friend Flicka*, *Seabiscuit*, the *Billy and Blaze* series and many others. That fueled my desire to put a girl protagonist in a unique and character-strengthening situation. I also noticed that many horse stories ended with an inevitable race or competition and that the value of the horse was often depicted through its ability to win something for the owner. I wanted more than that. I wanted reciprocity – for the human to “win” something for the horse, too.

How did you become interested in wild horses?

I began researching horses in general, reading nonfiction books about the historical and mythical significance of the species to man. Many world cultures revered the horse and measured a man's worth by how many horses he owned. That led me to stories about the role of the horse in the development of America: how the country flourished after the advent of horses from Spain via Mexico and the introduction of horses from Europe to the East Coast during Colonial times. Then I read *America's Last Wild Horses* by Hope Ryden and became fascinated with the social dynamics in wild herds and harem bands. I learned about the stallion's role as protector and the mare's role as leader and the alliances made among “sister mares.” I came to appreciate the equine sense of community.

How did your heroine, Maya, develop?

After researching the wild horses and going on wilderness rides to see them up close, I began to wonder about a young girl who lived a repressed life: one of confinement and loneliness, with no sense of community, which is the opposite of the wild horse world. Then I imagined what it would be like to thrust Maya into a remote and wild setting similar to that of the wild horses. I questioned how she might grow and change under those circumstances. I wanted Maya to discover a sense of community not only with her new family, but with the horse world, and with the land.

What affected your decision to learn how to ride, especially now as an adult?

I kept asking myself, “How can I write a book about this character and this horse and not know how to

ride?” Besides, here was my chance to live what I thought was a lost dream. I’d been on a horse before, but only a few times. In each of those instances, I sat placidly on a mount that followed a line of horses, nose-to-tail. I needed a different, more hands-on experience. I approached a trainer, Dana Rullo, in Olivenhain, California, and told her what I needed to accomplish in order to research and write this book. I admitted to her that I’d never had one lesson in my life but that I wanted to learn everything the correct way – no shortcuts. And I asked her to be strict with me. She agreed to train me. She was demanding and thorough and exactly the type of teacher I needed. I took hundreds of private riding lessons from her, sometimes riding three days a week to prepare for the two research rides I’d arranged. I still laugh at all the mistakes I made and how many times Dana said the words, “do-over.” Often, if I knew I would be learning a new skill at the next lesson, I’d research it at length beforehand. One day, Dana gave simple, clear instructions on how to side-pass. I struggled and then reiterated the myriad of details I’d read about the technique. She shook her head and said, “Stop thinking so hard and start feeling!” Like my character, Maya, I had to learn that good horsemanship is as much about feeling as it is about thinking.

Paint the Wind is a departure from your other novels—it’s still your signature storytelling, but the epic Western landscape feels like exciting new terrain for you. What kind of research did you do to get to know your setting?

I needed to go where my story would be set, or somewhere similar, to see the wild horses in their habitat. So I signed up for two research rides. During the first one (in May 2006, in the eastern Sierra Mountains), the weather turned wet and cold, but our group rode anyway, one day for six hours in freezing rain. I will never forget the moment we finally encountered a harem band: That first sighting was awe-inspiring. I realized how very seldom I have ever seen a large mammal in the wild, living free within its own defined society. That experience also gave me profound respect for the horses’ ability to withstand the elements and the restraints of man.

On the second ride (in August 2006, in southwestern Wyoming, near the Red Desert), we rode for eight days. I slept in a teepee, was caught on horseback in a swarm of “mean bees,” bathed in the Sweetwater River, and spent long days in the saddle. In that part of the country, there is much more sky above than there is earth below, and for me, there was something unsettling and settling about the wide open spaces. At night, the stars came slowly, one by one. The Milky Way emerged as a smear – a giant swipe across the speckled blanket of sky. It was peaceful and comforting. But at the same time, against it, I felt belittled and helpless. I wanted to convey that feeling to the reader.

In alternating chapters throughout much of the novel, you write from the point of view of a wild horse, Artemisia. Did you always know her story would be such a central part of the book?

As the story developed, I knew that I wanted to incorporate the horse world from a perspective other than Maya’s. As I researched the herd dynamics of horses in the wild, I became intrigued by the nuances of their society and how it is structured, especially the role of the lead mare. When I needed a horse character to fulfill Maya’s unresolved longings about her mother, a lead mare seemed the right choice.

Were there any special challenges in writing from the point of view of an animal?

The biggest challenge was to avoid giving the horses anthropomorphic characteristics. The book would have been much easier to write if I could have given them human emotions! But that wouldn’t have been true to the animal world. A horse’s sensibility is different from a human’s and I wanted to portray it correctly. I tried very hard to depict appropriate equine responses, but I still left a little room for some creative license.

The horses in the book are named for famous painters. What was your inspiration for this?

I tried many different approaches to naming the horses. (At one time, I toyed with the idea of naming them after the towns in Wyoming.) While researching, I visited the Gilcrease Museum: The Museum of the Americas, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and was inspired by their collection. There I saw, among others, the works of Frederic Remington, Charles Russell, Olaf Seltzer, Charles Banks Wilson, John Singer Sargent, John Audubon, N.C. Wyeth, and Winslow Homer. The artists and their works stayed with me. I realized that many of them were likely unfamiliar to young people, so I saw an opportunity to subtly introduce them. But most importantly, naming the horses after famous painters fit the story. Many are named for painters of the American Southwest because the story is set there. I hoped that if readers searched for their work, they might appreciate the landscape, history, and color of a part of this country that is truly unique. Other horses are named for artists whose personal journeys impressed me, and who had to overcome their family's or society's reservations about them becoming artists, such as Mary Cassatt and Artemisia Genteleschi. I also chose a few artists, like N.C. Wyeth, simply because I'm in awe of his work.

Anything else you'd like to share about your adventures? What was your most surprising discovery?

The writing of this book was a physical and an emotional challenge. As my character grew in my imagination, I discovered new territories too, away from the safe and familiar. Until I learned how to ride, I had never appreciated a horse's size and power and how sobering that can feel. Nor could I have imagined how passionately I would fall in love with horses, especially my training horse, Smokey, who knows so much more about riding than I do. The other revelation was how very much I appreciated being in the wilderness. There is something magical in a panoramic landscape. Without the extra-sensory world pressing in, the simplest tasks take on meaning, priorities become clear, relevance is easier to determine. As my character, Aunt Vi, says in the book, "Wide open space does that to people. Slows them down and gives them time and legroom to sort out their thoughts and put them in the right order." It certainly did that for me. Wide open space gave me the chance to slow down so that my story and characters could grow in my imagination.