

# Author Spotlight

With

## C.M. Millen



**Before writing full-time, you received a law degree from the University of Toledo. Then you went on to get your master's in literature from Trinity College. What made you make this switch?**

I love history and reading, and it seemed that law would be a good career choice. Law school provides an excellent background in writing and reading. There are many beautifully crafted legal opinions, and of course our constitutional history is filled with wonderful writings. But especially with the birth of our five children, and being home full-time with them, I kept being drawn back to my own childhood self who always wrote stories and illustrated them, and eventually, it took over. I remember the night I woke up at three A.M. with stories in my head that I had to put to paper or my brain would burst. It's then I knew that I had to go back to stories.

**Why did you decide you wanted to write for children rather than for adults? Is there a certain age group that you enjoy writing for the most?**

I think that a good story can be enjoyed by all ages. Children don't lose that total sense of joy when they discover something or learn something, so I guess that makes it more fun to write for them, but children come in all ages, don't they?

**Where did your love of poetry come from?**

In my family, the person who could spin a good yarn was revered. I have a large extended family, and growing up, I would listen to all of these great tales being told around the table. My dad could always recite poetry from memory, and first introduced me to the classic poems—"Under the spreading chestnut tree . . ." and so on, and sharing a "cool" poem with other members of the family was commonplace. So as a child, this reverence for good stories and well-written words permeated our household. I also believe it's a fundamental attribute of the Irish, who honor creative conversation and have a long, historic tradition of oral poetry. And we are Irish through and through.

**When you write your poetry, do you try to write in a specific form, for instance a sonnet, haiku, villanelle, etc.? If so, what is your favorite form of poetry?**

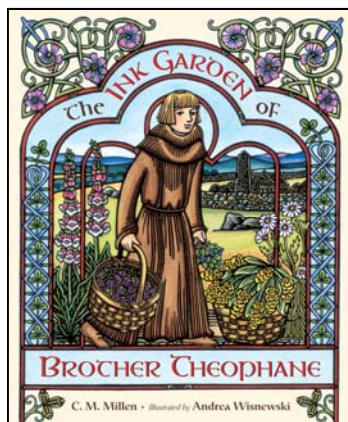
No, the story seems to develop its own form. They always start as a phrase or series of lines in my head, and then grow from there. So they all vary to fit the story. I love all good poetry, and to me, good poetry, to paraphrase Robert Frost, starts with joy and ends with wisdom.

**Where did the idea for *The Ink Garden of Brother Theophane* come from? How long did you work on it?**

The opening four lines have been in my head for many years, and were actually part of a different poem at one point. Reviewing Thomas Kinsella's translated poems from medieval Irish monks made me think about them and their working conditions, and then one thing led to another. The concept that the Irish monks saved many important Western writings, mixed with the commonplace troubles and frustrations with which those monks dealt, all melded together to form *Theophane*. I worked on it for over four years in fits and starts. It comes when it comes and I don't have any control over that, really.

**You often work with children, conducting workshops and teaching them how to express themselves through writing. What kind of advice do you give young writers?**

Read good books and lots of them, especially classics like *Tom Sawyer*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and great poets like Frost, Longfellow, and more modern ones like Seamus Heaney, Patrick Kavanaugh (one of my favorites), etc. With the increasing use of texting and the two minute music video, children are losing the ability to compose great sentences and enjoy a lengthy story that unfolds over time. Their attention span is diminishing and their need for instant gratification is growing. But this can be changed by reading a good, long book or classic poetry. Good reading leads to good writing. Turn off the electronics and turn the page! And keep a journal with you at all times to write down lines that pop into your head. From that one line, an entire story can grow!



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Ages 6-9

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In a monastery in the mountains of Mourne during the Middle Ages, one young monk struggled to focus on his task: copying the Bible and other scholarly books with plain brown ink made from wood bark in plain brown books in his plain brown robe at his plain brown desk. Brother Theophane was soon transferred from the scribe's room and assigned to make the ink that the brothers used. With his natural curiosity, Theophane discovered that inks could be made from other plants besides the wood bark. Berries and leaves produced other beautiful colors. And soon, the books the monks made were illuminated with colors and drawings.

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