

Author Spotlight with Marjorie Cowley



You began your career as a teacher of prehistoric archaeology to students from kindergarten through high school. How did you make the leap to writer? What was your inspiration?

I had never given a thought to writing before putting together a little book for the fourth birthday of my first grandson. I wrote a poem for him, calligraphed it, and illustrated it with the remarkable drawings of an Eskimo artist. It took about thirty hours to complete, and I didn't want to answer the phone or cook dinner during this period of joy and almost trancelike concentration. When I picked it up at Kinko's, I was filled with the amazement that occurs when the chaos of creation is transformed into a neat, handheld book. A friend, noting my excitement, said I should take some courses at UCLA in writing for children. I took her advice and started my first book while taking a class there. The pleasure and power I experienced in crafting the book for my grandson has never faded; four books later, I know I'm doing what I want to do.

How did you first become interested in Mesopotamia? What were your research methods, and how long did you study this period before you felt comfortable writing about it?



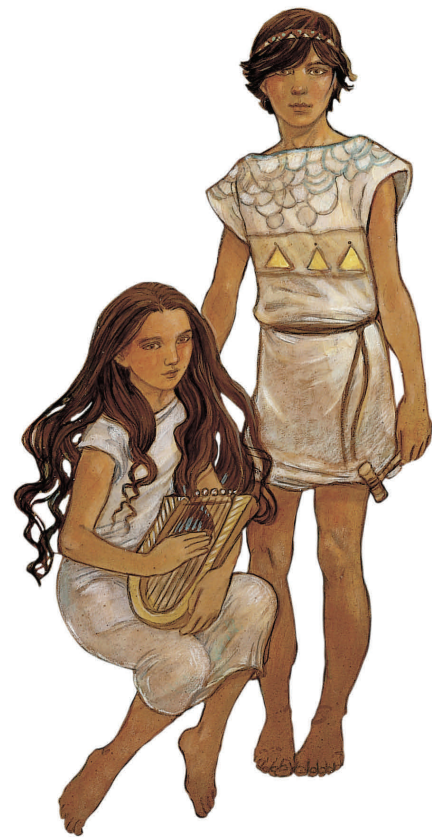
I was delighted to discover that a unit of study in human prehistory is mandated for California sixth-graders when I was in the middle of writing my first book, *Dar and the Spear-Thrower* (Clarion), which takes place 15,000 years ago in Western Europe. This sent me to the Department of Education Framework where the guidelines are listed. Because sixth-graders are my favorite audience, I noted that Mesopotamia is also mandated for this year, and this culture, the "first civilization," has long interested me. I began building my own library, attending lectures, using the Internet, and ultimately corresponding with a wide array of experts, unfailingly generous with their time and knowledge. It was vital to me that the fictional part of my story be woven into actual events and facts, so the writing of the book and the research went forward together.

You've written two other novels set in ancient history, *Dar the Spear-Thrower* (Clarion) and *Anooka's Answer* (Clarion). Why do you think that it is important to recreate fictional accounts of history? What difficulties are presented when writing about an ancient setting?

My interest in historical novels for children came from my long-ago delight in a series of books that involved two children in a variety of countries. I was both enchanted and educated, never imagining I would return to the concept. To me, learning about almost everything is enhanced by story, character, and emotional and intellectual immersion. The many teachers I've spoken to also believe this is the way "in" for their students. There are certainly difficulties embedding what is factually accurate in a novel set in an ancient, exotic background. At first glance this may seem to be too large of a challenge, but the basic human emotions (fear, anger, grief, joy) have not changed for many thousands of years and allow a writer to deal with what abides in all of us regardless of time or culture. A good story is a good story, and tales, myths, and legends have held the interest of people throughout our long history.

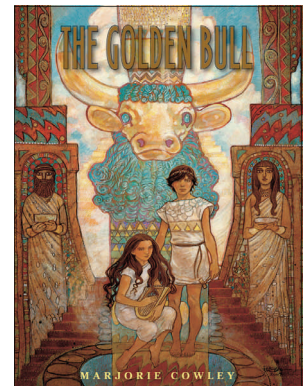
It is often hard to write fiction for middle-grade readers that can appeal to both girls and boys. What techniques and methods do you employ in your writing to do this? How do you create a story that attracts both genders?

It is a sad truth that young males have traditionally read books with a boy as the protagonist; sometimes a lesser female character is thrown in for balance. Girls, however, have often read books with a boy as the central character. In my first book, *Dar the Spear-Thrower* (Clarion), a boy drove the story forward because the tale involved the challenge of manipulating a brilliant compound weapon, the spear-thrower. But in my second book, (*Anooka's Answer*, Clarion), also with a prehistoric background, a brave and troubled girl carries the story. Many boys have told me that they liked the book; my hope is this rigid separation may be changing.



Books by Marjorie Cowley

Marjorie Cowley vividly imagines the intrigues and harsh struggle for survival in ancient Mesopotamia in this touching story of a brother and sister who must learn to respect each other's strengths and build a new relationship in order to find their own ways in the world.



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