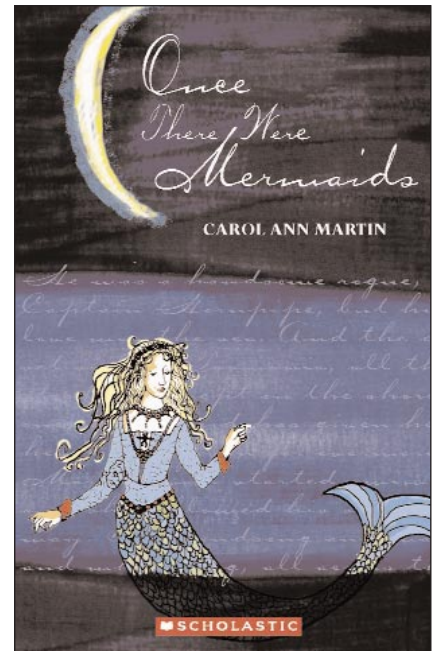


Once There Were Mermaids

Written by Carol Ann Martin



◀ The Back Story ▶ with Carol Ann Martin

What gave you the idea, or inspired you, to write a book that is set in Tasmania?

After the publication of 'Dulcie and Dud', a series of four books for seven-to-nine-year olds, my publisher Omnibus invited me to submit a novel-length book for eleven-to-thirteen-year olds. They suggested something humorous, perhaps reminiscent of the books Robin Klein used to write.

Having accepted the challenge, I decided that the best setting for my story would be here in southern Tasmania, where I live. I knew the locality and I knew the people, so I was immersed in it all while writing the story. Mariners Bay is fictitious but the book could be set in any of the little bays along our coastline. Likewise, although the characters are also fictitious, our small communities here are rich in highly individual, free-spirited, creative people, many of whom contributed something of themselves to the characters in *Mermaids*.

How do you go about writing a book?

When I begin writing a book, I do have a general idea of the storyline, but I don't have a complete picture of the whole thing mapped out in chronological order. It is more like the scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; people and incidents turning up all over the place, scribbled into notebooks, and then fitted together into the story.

Did you have to make many changes to this story during the editing process?

I can't over-emphasise the importance of editing, and I consider myself blessed to be writing for a publisher with such gifted and dedicated editors. The problem with the first draft of *Mermaids* is that too many characters wanted to be in it! All these way-out, wacky characters clamoured for their piece of the action. My editor tactfully pointed out that this could get confusing and readers might lose track of who was who. So some characters were combined (Zephyr, for example was originally two people), while others had to disappear altogether. But I suspect they may reappear some day and want to be in another story.

Which is your favourite character in this story?

I think I would have to say Miranda. I know that when I was her age, and I think it's true of many thirteen-year-olds today, the real world isn't always what we would like it to be, and we don't always have the confidence, the popularity, or whatever it takes to deal with the disappointments. The world of the imagination can be a place to escape to. But in Miranda's case I have tried to show that the two worlds don't have to be completely separate. Imagination is a gift that really can achieve and change things, and the important thing is never to lose one's belief that the mysterious and fantastic is out there somewhere, only just out of reach.

Miranda wants to believe in mermaids. What sort of things do you believe in?

I guess what I've described above – the possibility of anything. Mermaids, certainly, and I've also always had a fascination with unicorns. I believe that we are strongly connected to the past and that we carry history within us – that is, the lives and personalities of past generations are a part of who we are.

About the author:

Carol Ann Martin

I was born in England and have always loved books and reading. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a writer and when I was six I had my first poem published in a teachers' journal. My first job after leaving school was as a junior publishing assistant.

After emigrating to Sydney, I continued to work in publishing, both in-house and freelance, with time off to have my three daughters. In my spare time I continued to write short stories and TV scripts. But it was when I returned to full-time work as a children's book editor that I realised that writing for children was what I really wanted to do.

My earlier children's books were for pre-schoolers. I loved playing around with words, rhythms and rhymes for two-to-five-year-olds! When I decided to attempt stories for an older age group, I was fortunate enough to have 'Dulcie and Dud' accepted by Omnibus, and subsequently to be encouraged to write for even older children, which resulted in *Once There Were Mermaids*.

Today I am a grandmother and my husband and I are lucky enough to be living in rural Tasmania with our family all around us. We love our life here and, to me, it is a magical place where story ideas flow thick and fast. So I guess I'll be writing for quite a while longer. I certainly hope so!

Teaching Ideas ✓

Before Reading ✓

- Show students the title of the book and ask them to predict what the book will be about. Have them write their answers on a piece of paper so that they can refer to it once they have read the story.
- Ask students when this book was written. Was it written a long time ago or recently? Have students justify their answers. Ensure that they found their answers from the imprint page. Discuss this page with students. Point out where it is found in the book and the information it contains. Do students find any of this information useful? Do all books have imprint pages? What might be the purpose of an imprint page?
- Read the blurb to students. Does this tempt them to read the story? Remind students to justify their answers.
- There is a quote from Blossom on the blurb that says: 'Life's full of strange messages.' What might this mean? Have students ever had any strange messages?
- Have students brainstorm titles of other books or movies that feature mermaids. (List these on the board as they might be useful for the Literature study on page 5 of these notes.) Were they fun to read or see? Do students believe in mermaids?

Activities

Wanted!

The title of this story includes the words 'once' and 'were'. This implies that mermaids are no longer around. Where have they gone? Make a 'Wanted' poster asking people to look out for mermaids. Remember to include a picture, a description of their appearance, personality, their likes, where they prefer to live, your contact details and any other helpful information.

More information

What is a mermaid? Using the internet, dictionary or other resources, try to define a mermaid in a few sentences. When completed, read your definition to the class.

During reading ✓

- Place students into small groups and ask them to take it in turns to read the story – perhaps each student could read a double-page spread at a time.
- Discuss the different fonts used – the letters at the beginning and end of the book are in a different font to the narrative, and italics are used in other parts of the story. Ask students to give reasons for this.
- Encourage students to ask questions as they read, or listen to, the story. For example, on page 33, Miranda tells Nygel that she is a Celtic Princess. What is a Celtic Princess? Students might need to research to find the answer.
- On page 25 Blossom says that she has the spirit of a black swan and on page 47 Zephyr tells Miranda that she has the spirit of a particular hill. Encourage students to reflect on Blossom's theory that everything is connected (page 25). If students were each given a spirit, what would it be? What would they like to have the spirit of? (Miranda thought that Blossom was more like a ginger cat than a black swan!)
- Greenies are mentioned throughout the book, for example, 'Greenies Stitch Up Resort Tycoon' (page 126). Ensure that students understand what a greenie is. How can someone 'stitch up' a resort tycoon?
- Have students discuss the words that Miranda used to describe Mariners Bay (page 96). Ask groups to brainstorm other words that could be used to describe the area. Have each group appoint a spokesperson to read their ideas to the rest of the class. Make a list of these words so that students can refer to them. This list might be useful for the debating and poster activities in 'After reading'.
- Once groups have completed reading the story, ask students to comment on their favourite bit in the book. Why was this their favourite part?

Activities

Who am I?

Miranda liked to imagine that she was a Celtic Princess while Nygel enjoyed being Mangler Malone (page 33). If you could be someone else, who would you like to be? Once you have worked out who you would like to be, find or make an appropriate outfit and bring it in to class. Perhaps your teacher could organise an 'alter-ego' day where everyone dresses up. Try and work out who your friends are dressed up to be.

My café

Blossom created her café to look like the cosmos. She decorated it to suit the theme and cooked what she considered to be the appropriate food. Imagine that you have been asked to design a very special café. You also have to decide on a great menu. Draw, or build, your café and label its unique features. Present your design and menu to the class.

Customers wanted

As the café was not attracting customers at the beginning of the story, Blossom hoped that Miranda would think of a 'way-out idea' to encourage people to come. If you had to think of a plan to get people to come to the café, what ideas would you come up with? Imagine that you have been asked to present your ideas to a committee, and that you will have to compete with your classmates to get the job. You will need to come up with an excellent presentation to convince the committee that you should get the job. Once everyone has presented their ideas, vote on the one you thought was the best.

Australian Aboriginals

Miranda had been taught that the last Tasmanian Aboriginals had died around one hundred years ago (page 52). After meeting Jack Brannigan, she is now not sure that this is true. Research to find out what you can about Tasmanian Aboriginals. Are any still alive? Give a brief account of their history and present it to the class.

After reading ✓

■ Once everyone has completed reading the story, revisit the predictions made by students earlier on. Compare the predictions with the story.

■ Ask students how Miranda changes as the book progresses. Stimulate students' thinking by asking questions such as:

- What was Miranda like at the beginning of the story? What was she like by the end of the story?
- How does she use her imagination?
- What does she think of herself?
- How do others see her?
- How has she helped others?

Students might like to do profiles of other characters to see how they developed as the story progresses.

■ One of the themes of this story is friendship. Is it important to have a friend or friends? Ask students what they like about their friends. Discuss the friendships in this story.

■ Organise a class debate. Ask students if they believed that Miranda and her friends were right in trying to stop Jerome Ambrazine establishing Oceana Park (and the ThrillBoat). After deciding on the topic (eg 'Should a major tourist resort be allowed to operate in Mariners Bay?') have students volunteer to be on either the affirmative or negative teams. Those students who do not have speaking roles can be the judges. At the end of the debate, ask for a show of hands to decide on the winning team.

Activities

Power of the media

Radio is one way of trying to get a message across to the community. Angus was able to get Blossom an interview on Bottom End FM (pages 96-7). Unfortunately she was on at 5.15 in the morning, so not many people heard her speak. With a friend, organise an interview for the radio. You need to push your point of view about whether or not the resort and the ThrillBoat ride should go ahead. Remember to be as persuasive and as expressive as you can so that you keep people listening and get them to agree with you. After practising your questions and answers, present your interview to the class. Could you persuade class members to agree with you?

Modelling mermaids

After Miranda was mentioned in the newspaper about believing in mermaids, she received presents of mermaids that were made from materials such as papier mâché, ceramics, patchwork, wood and wool. She was also given mermaid drawings, cards, bookmarks, poems and stories. She was thrilled!

Make a mermaid for yourself (or your mother or a friend). Try to be as creative as possible. When completed, display your mermaid in the classroom before taking it home.

Let's celebrate

Miranda spent New Year's Eve having a picnic on a beach (page 79). Have you ever had a special night out for New Year's Eve? Using your imagination, write about the way you would like to spend the evening. Where would you celebrate? Who would you like to be with? What food would you like? What entertainment would you have?

Literature study

To encourage students to read, and to increase their enjoyment and understanding of *Once There Were Mermaids*, have them undertake the following activity.

■ What do you know about mermaids? Using your school or public libraries find as many books, videos and other resources as you can on the subject. Mermaids often feature in folklore and fairytales – one well-known tale being *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. Bring the resources you find into class and display them on a table. Browse through all of the books that you and your peers have brought in. Discuss how the mermaids are portrayed in these books. How are they the same, how do they differ?

Choose one of the books displayed and write a report on it. Discuss the plot and the characters, whether or not the characters are convincing, your favourite part, and if you would recommend this book to a friend. Read your report to the class, and listen to the reports read out by other class members. They might help you to find some really good books to read.