

Background about the Book – Seven Wonders of Sassafras Springs

When Eben McAllister reads about the Seven Wonders of the World his imagination races. He's itching to escape the sameness of the small farming community of Sassafras Springs, Missouri, and explore the world. Then Pa challenges Eben to find Seven Wonders in his own neighborhood. The boy doubts Sassafras Springs has much to offer, but rises to the test when Pa promises him a coveted trip out west if he succeeds.

While his mission puzzles his friends and neighbors, Eben perseveres, with the help of his faithful dog, Sal. Though wary at first, the members of the community are eventually enlivened by his mission and folks eagerly share their seemingly simple possessions and their eerily true tales - and some downright whoppers, as well. A haunted table ... a half-mad rainmaker ... a flying outhouse . . . a loom that weaves the truth . . . an evil ship in a bottle: Eben is amazed at the range of wonders he finds on his own home turf.

Bettygbirney.com

About the Author



Biography

I wrote my first "book" at age seven. It was called "Teddy Bear in the Woods" and was followed by a sequel. Luckily, my parents encouraged my writing and my sister, Janet, was a great writer and role model.

I didn't just write, however. When I wasn't roller-skating (my favorite pastime), I was riding my bike, playing piano, swimming, reading, playing cards and board games or just hanging out with my friends. I loved school, but I loved vacations, too!

From kindergarten through graduation, I attended school in Affton, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Then I graduated from Webster College (now Webster University) in Webster Groves, Missouri. Of course, I majored in English and kept on writing.

After working in advertising in St. Louis, Missouri and in Chicago, Illinois, I eventually moved to Southern California. First, I worked for Disneyland (fun job!) in the advertising department. The monorail whizzed past my window all day long. Then I worked at the Disney Studio in Burbank, where I had another fun job, writing and producing television and radio commercials and theatrical trailers (previews of coming attractions) for everything from re-releases of "Cinderella" and "Fantasia" to "Tex."

When the Disney Channel was started, I became a writer and story editor for *Welcome to Pooh Corner*. Since then, I've written more than 200 episodes of animated and live-action television programs including *Madeline*, *Doug*, *Bobby's World*, *Dumbo's Circus*, *The Puzzle Place*, *Camp Candy*, *Little Mouse on the Prairie*, *Where's Waldo*, *Fraggle Rock*, and *Zoobilee Zoo*. That's right, I write cartoons! I also wrote a number of award-winning afterschool specials and many interactive CD-ROM programs, including the award-winning "Berenstain Bears on their Own," "Richard Scarry's Busiest Neighborhood Ever," and "The Crayon Factory."

A made-for-television family movie I wrote, *Mary Christmas*, starring John Schneider, Cynthia Gibb and Tom Bosley, aired on the PAX network in 2002. It was the highest rated movie in PAX history and has aired each Christmas season since then.

I have been fortunate enough to win a Writer's Guild of America Award and three Humanitas Prizes (as well as two other nominations). In 2002, I won a Daytime Emmy Award for *Madeline*, after two previous Emmy nominations. More recently, I received the Christopher Award for *Friendship According to Humphrey*, many children's choice awards for *The World According the Humphrey* and was inducted into the Affton (MO) School District Hall of Fame.

But my first love - going back to age seven - is writing books. Over the years, I've written more than 35 children's books, many of them on Disney themes.

Bettybirney.com

Reviews – Seven Wonders of Sassafras Springs

“...magical realism of the episodic wonders..... provide grist for a solid read-aloud.” *Booklist*

"Author Birney conjures just enough fancy... to nudge readers into pondering what rarities lie in their own backyards." *Denver Post*

"I'll wager some readers will want a ticket straight to Sassafras Springs." -- *Contra Costa Times*

A literary folk story blending down-home narrative and characters with a sprinkling of magical realism. It is a tale of transformation, of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, of the wonderful things that can happen anywhere to anyone. In Sassafras Springs, MO, in the summer of 1923, Eben McAllister, 11, is fascinated by the Seven Wonders of the World. Pa assures him that there are marvels right under his nose. In fact, the man challenges him to find Seven Wonders in seven days in Sassafras Springs. If Eben can do so, his father will buy him a ticket to visit his cousins in Colorado where he'll be able to see a mountain. On the first day, Eben hears the story of his Sunday school teacher's applehead doll, which saved the woman's life when she was very sick as a child. Then there's the wonder of an old saw that, when played, allows Calvin Smiley to grow more food than anyone around. Cully Pone's bookcase used to belong to a rainmaker who was seeking revenge when he ended a drought but didn't get paid by the town; it has saved a man's life, held the secrets of the universe, and now holds up Cully's house. Most certainly this is a wonder. Eben completes his quest in this old-fashioned tale that could have been set in Bill Brittain's *Coven Tree* (*The Wish Giver* [HarperCollins, 1983]). Black-and-white sketches enhance the text and its folksy character. Perfect for reading aloud.

School Library Journal

In this fun, folksy outing set in 1923, 12-year-old Eben McAllister has seven days to find seven wonders in Sassafras Springs, Mo. Convinced that his ordinary berg has nothing on the Seven Wonders of the World, Eben reluctantly accepts his father's challenge: "I just think there's no use searching the world for Wonders when you can't see the marvels right under your own nose." What follows is a weeklong odyssey where Eben asks people he's known his whole life if they have anything special lying around. They do. It's not the objects themselves that are so extraordinary--an applehead doll named Miss Zeldy, a rickety bookcase, a table--as much as his neighbors' magical stories that accompany them that will inspire everything from chuckles to chills. The matter-of-fact first-person narrative is refreshing, as Eben is neither overly precocious nor terribly troubled--just a small-town boy with wanderlust who learns that an explorer doesn't have to travel too far afield to have an adventure, but that leaving town still sounds awfully good.

Kirkus Reviews

Read Alikes – Seven Wonders of Sassafras Springs

The Power of One by Bryce Courtenay

Jumping the Scratch by Sarah Weeks

Worth by A. LaFaye

How it Happened in Peach Hill by Marthe Jocelyn

Mama's Window by Lynn Rubright

Novelistplus.com

Discussion Questions: The Seven Wonders of Sassafras Springs

1. What do you know about the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World?
2. Which ones would you like to be able to see?
3. What wonders exist in your community?
4. How could you go about uncovering them?
5. Do you think you would like living in Sassafras Springs? Why or why not?
6. If you could accompany Eben on his search for wonders, which person would you spend the most time talking to? Why?
7. Eben was rewarded for his success by being able to go to St. Louis on the train. Imagine you earned a week's vacation anywhere in the world. Where would you go? Why?
8. What do you think Eben's father meant when he said, "I just think there's no use searching the world for Wonders when you can't see the marvels right under your own nose."

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be applied to any book. You can tweak the questions for your specific book. They can be cut into strips and passed around in a basket to help facilitate discussion.

My favorite part of the book was...

A better title for this book would be...because...

(Name of character) reminds me of myself because...

My least favorite character was...because...

If I were (name of character, -----) I would (wouldn't) have...

(Name of character) reminds me of someone I know because...

I changed my mind about...because...

I would (wouldn't) like to read another book by this author because...

This book made me think...When I finished this book, I still wondered...

This book reminded me of...

I'd like to tell the author...

What happened in this book was very realistic (unrealistic) because...

This book was better (worse) than the movie version because...

When I started reading his book, I thought...

I didn't like...because...

This book made me realize...

If I could talk to (name of character), I would say...

One thing I have noticed about the author's style is...

If I could be any character in the book I would be...because...

I was surprised when...

I think the main thing the writer was trying to say was...

The most important thing about this book is...

I predicted that...

I think the writer must be ...because...

I would change the ending...