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**Dear Mrs. Searfoss,**

Katherine Paterson

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# Dear Mrs. Searfoss,



LETTER FROM **KATHERINE PATERSON**

*In the fall quarter, I introduced my fifth grade class to our next novel, *Bridge to Terabithia*. I immediately received correspondence from a few parents who were against the "bad" language in the book and who felt the book should be taken off of our school's reading list.*

*The administration reviewed the book, loved it, and announced that the book would be kept on our list. The principal explained the author's Christian background, and I explained the use of dialect to the parents and students. The parents still disagreed with us but allowed their children to read the book.*

*I had my students write to Katherine Paterson (author of *Bridge to Terabithia*) and express their views of this book. All of their comments were positive. I also wrote to Katherine Paterson, explained what had happened, and asked her if she had any ideas about how I could deal with this issue in the future.*

*I received the following reply and, after reading it, vowed to keep great literature from being censored.*

— Brenda Searfoss, teacher at E. P. Clarke  
Elementary School, St. Joseph Public Schools

March 26, 1995

Dear Mrs. Searfoss,

Thank you for your encouraging letter. Not all administrators end up loving *Bridge to Terabithia*. I'm glad yours did. As to what to say to parents, ah, this is more difficult. I myself am a concerned Christian parent, so they have a lot of sympathy from me.

I think perhaps the basic problem is difference in what sincere people think that a book of fiction is about. Those who are disturbed by my books often express concern about how my characters talk and/or act. I believe that characters in books have to be true, that they don't have to be and that they aren't supposed to be role models of proper behavior. Look at Jesus' stories. If you eliminate from them everyone who is setting a bad example or is imperfect, you'd lose a lot of wonderful stories. Just think of the prodigal son, for example. The Bible as a whole is full of stories of people who do not behave themselves, but the Bible is trying to tell us who, in the everlasting mercy of God, we are. It is not trying to give us examples of proper behavior. How else are we to know that God loves us sinners unless we see it in action in Scripture and experience it in our own lives?

I have a great deal of respect for my readers. I dare to believe that they can understand that fiction is not about telling us how to behave; rather it is about our human experience as it is. One famous Christian writer, Flannery O'Connor, has said: "Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction, it isn't grand enough for



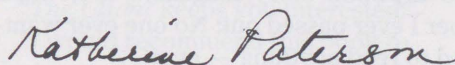
you." The most thrilling thing about the Christian faith to me is that God was willing to get "dusty." That's what the incarnation is all about, God becoming a human being, and to our Jewish and Muslim neighbors, that is a scandalous and blasphemous claim. How could the perfect Creator and Judge of the universe become a man? And yet I not only believe it is true, but that it is the best news the world ever heard.

Jess's use of the word "Lord" is very offensive to some of my fellow Christians. I wrote the book out of love for a class of rural Virginia sixth graders I taught long ago and out of love for my son, whose best friend was killed by lightning. In writing about a child like those sixth graders, I heard their voices in my head and tried hard to be true to the way they spoke. I think as a writer I have to be true to my characters, even when I would not choose to speak or behave the way they do. The problem with my son was more difficult. David thought Lisa's death had occurred because he was bad and so God hated him and was going to kill off everyone he loved. I needed to tell him in every way I could that God loves us just as we are. I find that very good news indeed. If all the children in the books I write are perfect and therefore like no children any of us knows, how will imperfect children find comfort in them? And yet, I am very grateful to say, that many children around the world have been able to see themselves in Jess Aaron and have found his story a source of encouragement and hope.

Of course, there are people who choose not to read the book, and that is certainly their decision to make, but I don't believe I can change the way I write even when sincere Christians disapprove. I guess that story Jesus told of the shepherd going out to find the one lost sheep has always made wonderful sense to me and will continue to shape the way I have chosen to write.

This is far more than you'd probably want to say to anybody, but I thought I'd share my thinking with you anyhow. Thanks for caring.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Katherine Paterson".

Katherine Paterson