



the art of storytelling

LYNN SKINNER LOVES TO TEACH AND TELL STORIES, BOTH OF WHICH LED HER TO WRITE TEN CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT TEACH CHARACTER BUILDING, CREATIVE THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING.

"My grandmother Flora Snooks and her sisters founded the Garden Club in Ailey in 1929. It's one of the oldest Garden Clubs in America," said Lynn. "She was part of a very large family with many siblings, and they all lived right in this area. It was always a happy place for me to come," which was the explanation for why it was the place she and her husband had chosen to spend the years of their retirement in 2009. It also explained why it had become the perfect environment for Lynn's gift of storytelling to flourish.

In addition to the time spent with her grandmother in Ailey, Lynn was also her grandmother's traveling companion. From the time she was about five years old, she spent two weeks every August in the mountains with her grandmother. Lynn was not the only grandchild, but Flora Snooks was Lynn's only living grandparent, which may have been the reason she was the one her grandmother chose to take.

Whatever the reason, Lynn always understood that the opportunity came with a responsibility. Her grandmother's eyes had grown dim with time, and it was Lynn's responsibility to make sure she didn't stumble or fall. In a sense, she became her grandmother's eyes. In return, Lynn was given the gift of seeing the world through the eyes of a woman who understood and valued the beauty around her. Lynn traveled with her grandmother every summer until she married—except for that one year she traveled to Europe between her junior and senior year of college. It was a decision that would prove pivotal.





When Lynn was a child, she often traveled with her grandmother Flora Snooks. Flora's family was from Ailey and she and her sisters founded the Ailey Garden Club, which is one of the oldest in the country.

"I was fortunate to get a position with the Proctors in Zurich, Switzerland, caring for their four young daughters," said Lynn. "I had not met them before I arrived. We had only communicated by letter. When they picked me up from the train station, the first thing Ms. Proctor said was, 'We are so excited that you're here because our friend's college age boys will also be here for the summer. We can't wait for you to meet them.'"

Since they were the only two American families living in that particular area at the time, the Proctors and the Skinners spent a lot of time together. But Ms. Proctor's excitement was not shared by her children's new American guardian. "It was the same thing I'd heard every year when I traveled with my grandmother," said Lynn. "We stayed at the same place and saw the same families year after year. Every summer someone wanted to set me up with

someone they knew. I thought, 'I couldn't believe I've come all the way across the ocean to hear the same thing again.'" Only this time, it was different. This time the young man was Sterling (Skip) Skinner. Four years later, the two married. It's safe to say that Lynn forgave Ms. Proctor for playing matchmaker.

After one year of teaching school, her teaching career became a fulltime career of teaching as a mother. "I feel like I have always been teaching in one way or another," she said, smiling. Like the best of teachers, Lynn crafted her lessons with stories. And even after her three children were grown and on their own, conversations with friends somehow turned to storytelling.

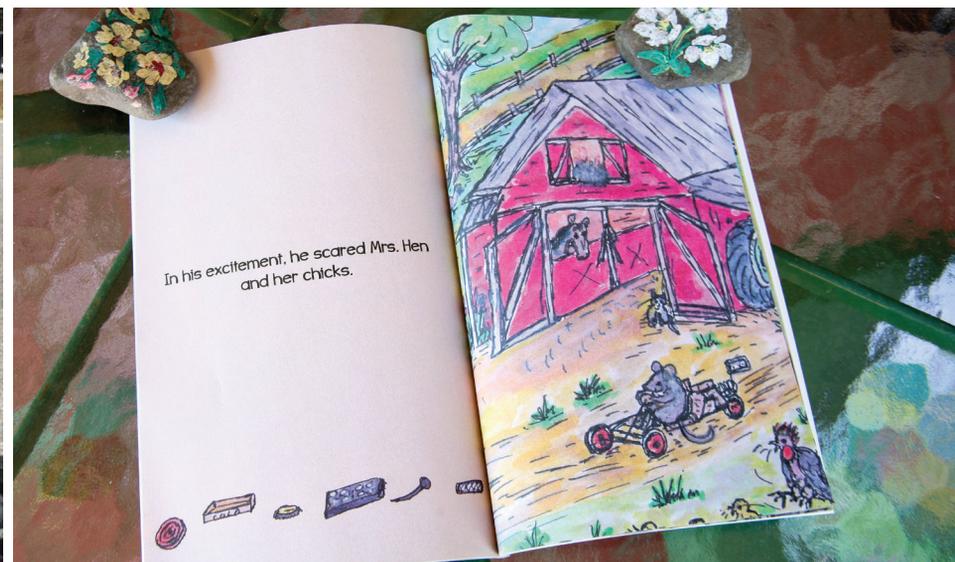
Some of my friends in Wisconsin, where they lived at the time, suggested she should put her stories into writing. "I didn't think too much about it at first," said Lynn. It wasn't



“We were sitting on the porch one day, and I was thinking about this story. It was going over and over in my mind. Finally, I decided to just get a pad and paper and write it down.”

until she and her husband had moved to Ailey in 2009 that she began to consider following her friend’s advice. “We were sitting on the porch one day, and I was thinking about this story. It was going over and over in my mind. Finally, I decided to just get a pad and paper and write it down.” She smiled, and added, “Somehow that’s a different commitment when you put it on paper.”

The story was a creative blending of nonfiction and fiction, facts spun in a barrel of imaginative play. With a mouse named Eugene, the middle name of both her husband and son, Lynn crafted a tale based on the memories of watching her son’s creative process as a child. “He loved this go-cart he got for Christmas when he was about six,” said Lynn. When he was fifteen, he decided he needed something bigger



TOP The character of Eugene the Mouse is based on Lynn's son Sterling, who is pictured with his daughter Kate in front of a vintage race car. **LEFT** Lynn's husband Skip and her granddaughter Kate represented Eugene the Mouse at the Mount Vernon Christmas parade in December 2018. Kate is dressed up like the character from Lynn's books.

"I want to teach something," said Lynn about her stories. Whether they teach about "sharing, helping, apologizing, or accepting someone who is different," Lynn hopes her stories encourage children to engage with people and nature.

and built a street-legal dune buggy. Later, he built a Porsche using the best parts he could find from two or three old ones. "He drove that car to Georgia Tech where he was going to school. I said to him, 'Sterling, this is crazy. That car will never make it.' I followed him all the way there." She laughed. "He drove that car for about five more years."

Lynn envisioned her son's search for parts and his creative process. "For the story, I made it a go-cart, since that was a much simpler machine for a mouse to make." She smiled. "With the story on paper, it seemed to say, 'What are you going to do now?' I don't do anything with art, so I began looking for an illustrator." For two years Lynn talked to different artists, but none seemed the right fit for this particular book. And then a conversation and an invitation led her to the perfect person. It was almost as if the dots that connected her path to Mrs. Polly Rushton had been sprinkled with fairy dust. "I'd just met Truett Andrew at church, and I said, 'If you're ever up my way, stop by, and we'll have a cup of tea together.' It wasn't many days before she called to say she was on her way some place and had to pass by my house. Of course, I invited her to stop by."

Over cups of hot tea, the conversation turned to Lynn's search for an illustrator for the children's book she had written. "Truett immediately said, 'Call Miss Polly,'" as she was affectionately called. "I had no idea who she was, but I called her. She said, 'Well, why don't you come over, and we'll talk about it.' I did, and she said, 'Just leave your story, and I'll see what I can do.' A

few days later, she called and said, 'Come see what I've done.'" Lynn smiled broadly. "That was really fun." Everything with Miss Polly was fun.

Lynn's first book was entitled, *Eugene and his Go-Kart Machine: A Tale of a Creative Mouse*. With the perfect illustrator, more stories were quick to follow: *Eugene's Mistake at the Garden Gate: The Resolve of a Creative Mouse*, and *Eugene Meets Bojean: The Acceptance of a Creative Mouse*.

"I was doing a book signing when someone walked in and said, 'Happy Birthday, Miss Polly.'" That was the first time Lynn learned that her illustrator was ninety years old. For Miss Polly's next birthday, Lynn threw her a party at her house. "A friend of hers, who was an excellent pianist, played for the birthday. I turned around, and there my husband was up dancing with Miss Polly!"

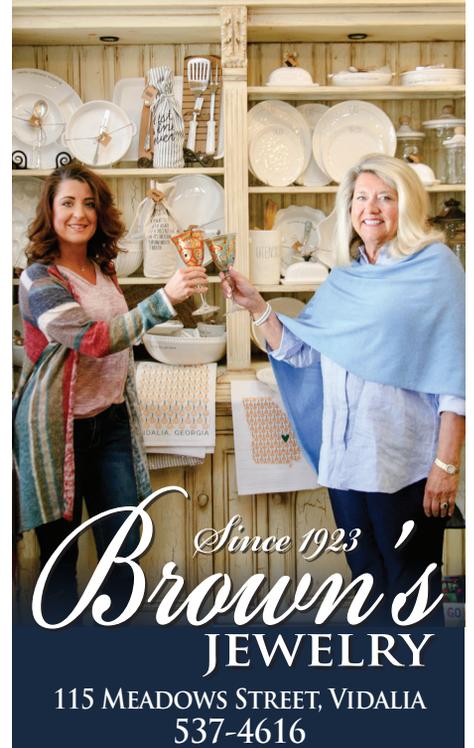
Three more of Lynn's books in the Eugene series would be illustrated by Miss Polly. "I had given her the fifth one to do when she passed away in 2014," said Lynn. The incredible Miss Polly Rushton was ninety-two.

Lynn's next two books, *Eugene, The Mouse, at the Big Farmhouse: The Contentment of a Creative Mouse*, and *Eugene Fishing & Wishing: The Reasoning of a Creative Mouse*, were illustrated by the talented artist Pharis Davis. When she got ready for the next book to be illustrated, "Pharis was having some health problems and unable to do it. I had to find another illustrator."

At the same time, Lynn also began a new series she based on the lives of people she knew with disabilities. Ever the teacher, she

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“I was never in this for fame or fortune,” said Lynn with a smile. “I write these stories because it’s fun.”

said, “Each story would focus on someone with disabilities who has a beautiful positive attitude in spite of the limitations they face.” She hoped to base the first book on Dolly, the daughter of her college roommate. “I called Dolly’s mother and said, ‘I’ve got this new idea, and I’d like to write about your daughter Dolly.’” She agreed, but only if the illustrator was their mutual friend Ingrid Dohm, not only because of her talents as an internationally known artist, but also because Ingrid knew Dolly personally.

“Ingrid is a native of Austria,” said Lynn, “and she married an American. I met her many years ago when we were living in Wisconsin. She and her husband have three children who are roughly the same ages as our three children, so they grew up playing at one another’s houses. When Lynn called, it was the perfect time. “Ingrid just so happened to have a break in her schedule.” *Happy Birthday, Dolly: Sharing Happiness* was published in 2016.

In 2017, while Lynn was visiting some friends in Westchester County, New York, an idea for another book came while enjoying their garden. “As I was enjoying my coffee in the garden, the birds were chirping, the flowers were blooming, and I noticed my friend’s cat Bandit just meandering through this beautiful garden. I thought, ‘What a lovely idea.’” That lovely idea became *Bandit’s Garden: Observing But Not Disturbing*, and illustrated by Ingrid Dohm. The following year, Lynn added *Anytime Is Party Time for Eugene the Mouse: The Wisdom of a Creative Mouse* to her Eugene the Creative Mouse series with illustrations once again provided by Ingrid Dohm.

Lynn makes no attempt to mask the message in each story she writes. “I want to teach something,” she said. Whether her story is about “sharing, helping, apologizing, or accepting someone who is different than you,” Lynn’s hope is to encourage children to engage with people and nature.

“I have a problem with kids being so busy with electronics and computers. I think they’re missing something very important.” She’s

not the only one. In one book about this very issue entitled, *Reset Your Child’s Brain: A Four-Week Plan to End Meltdowns, Raise Grades, and Boost Social Skills by Reversing the Effects of Electronic Screen-Time* by Victoria L. Dunkley, MD, she writes, “Like many other aspects of our fast-paced but often sedentary lifestyle, screen-time is introducing new variables into the health equation. Screen-time affects our brains and bodies at multiple levels, manifesting in various mental health symptoms related to mood, anxiety, cognition, and behavior.” Educators and parents alike are concerned. But history has proven again and again, tell a story, paint a picture, sing a song and art will change the world.

To date, Lynn has published ten children’s books for ages 4 through 8. Following the publication of *Bandit’s Garden*, a couple of people with the Deep South Garden Clubs, Inc., which covers the Garden Clubs in six Southern states, suggested Lynn write another with the Garden Clubs of America in mind. Once again, the artist Ingrid Dohm was the illustrator. *How Does Your Garden Grow: God’s Master Plan* is dedicated to Garden Club members everywhere and specifically to Lynn’s fellow members in the Ailey Garden Club.

It’s been over seventy-years since Lynn first began visiting her grandmother in Ailey as a child. It’s ironic that the woman who was a founder of the Garden Club in Ailey was named “Flora,” which means “Flower.” A legacy can come in many ways. As her grandmother’s eyes, Lynn saw beauty in creation and enjoyed slowed moments that only age can teach us to take. Now a grandmother herself, Lynn said, “I was never in this for fame and fortune. I write these stories because it’s fun,” her eyes reflecting the life in the azaleas and magnolia trees that were just beginning to awaken with spring outside her window in Ailey. ♣TCM

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