

Interview with the Author of “Compost Stew”!

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Mary McKenna Siddals is the author of several children’s books. She lives in British Columbia, Canada. Currently she is putting the finishing touches on her next book, *Bringing the Outside In*, due out in early 2016.

In the dedication in *Compost Stew*, you mention your mother – what was your experience composting and gardening as a child? What inspired you to write about composting for children?

My experience with composting as a child was... absolutely none! Our home simply wasn’t well-situated for it, or for gardening. Nonetheless, it was my mom who introduced me to composting, though not until I was all grown up and with a family of my own. While here for a visit, she observed that we weren’t composting, and made it her mission to get us started. Undeterred by my every objection – I didn’t have the space, the time, the energy! – she simply collected a bowlful of kitchen scraps and unceremoniously dumped them into a corner of my yard, thus establishing my first compost heap.



The author with her mother / compost instigator.

Clever mom, for if I was too lazy to start a compost heap, I would naturally also be too lazy to dismantle one, and sure enough, by the time she went home a couple of weeks later, our humble heap was well on its way and virtually maintaining itself. With the kids cheerfully adding kitchen scraps and my husband dutifully contributing yard waste, I realized that Mother Nature would do the rest of the work... letting me off scot-free! I was hooked.

With my compost now a-stewin', my thoughts began a-brewin'... How could I share my newfound enthusiasm with kids? Could I come up with compostable items for every letter of the alphabet? Could I fit them into a recipe format? Could I make it all rhyme? The challenge was irresistible, evolving over time into my groundbreaking picture book, COMPOST STEW: An A to Z Recipe for the Earth... and all because My Mother Made Me Do It!

Many of your books have an element of nature in them. Have you always been an outdoor enthusiast? What are your favorite outdoor activities?

I have always loved simply BEING outdoors. As a child, I spent lots of time outside year-round, sledding and skating through the winter, riding my bike and roller-skating in the spring, playing neighborhood games of hide and seek through the summer, and collecting leaves on my way home from school in the fall. Nowadays, my backyard is filled with birds and squirrels, and my remote northern city is surrounded by magnificent forests with wilderness trails, perfect for hiking and exploring. I love being so close to nature, and especially enjoy catching glimpses of the many wild animals who sometimes wander through my neighborhood, including foxes, deer, moose, and even bears!

I think the best picture books find a perfect marriage between writing and images. Compost Stew is a fun read and fun to look at. Did you get to pick who illustrated Compost Stew?



Authors rarely have any input in selecting their illustrators, so I was fortunate indeed to have the publisher, Tricycle Press, pair [Ashley Wolff](#) with my manuscript. Just as they were beginning their search to find the right illustrator for COMPOST STEW, she was finishing up two books for them that had been done in collage, which struck them as the perfect medium to echo a recycling theme... AND, coincidentally, Ashley is also an avid composter! What a serendipitous match!

I could never have imagined all the rich detail that Ashley would bring to COMPOST STEW, or the ingenious way she would develop the setting and characters to link the ingredients and give them a story, bringing my words to such vivid life with her whimsical visual interpretation. I'm absolutely thrilled with our book, which certainly is the perfect union of art and text.

What is your compost set up like at home? Do you have any cold weather composting tips?

Our compost setup has evolved a bit from that simple open heap started by my mom. Bears are a very real concern up here in northern Canada, so once it was apparent that we were in it for the long haul, we transferred our heap into a store-bought bin with a lid, and replaced the bowl beside the kitchen sink with a covered collection bucket. Our straightforward approach to composting has not really changed, however. I'm still a lazy, er, that is, a proponent of passive composting, meaning that I really do just add to the pot and let it all rot... and eventually it always does, although in our northern climate, it may take a year or longer to break down completely. For this reason, we acquired a second composter, so that while we are actively adding to one receptacle, the other one, having already been filled, can be left undisturbed while its contents decompose.

Winters can be quite harsh up here, putting decomposition on hold, but as long as the composter is still accessible (not iced shut and/or buried too deeply in snow), we simply continue to deposit fresh kitchen scraps onto the frozen heap all winter long. My philosophy?

“Frozen solid? Let it be!
It will thaw eventually...”

So, if winter weather brings your compost to a standstill, just be patient, and never fear, Mother Nature will resume her work in due time!



What do you think is the greatest obstacle that prevents families from composting?

Assuming that outdoor space is not really an issue (and if it is, there's always indoor composting, but that's a whole other bin of worms), I think many folks are simply intimidated (as I was) by the very prospect of composting. They assume that it will be difficult, time-consuming, and riddled with problems. Of course, there are many ways you can complicate the process with fancy composters and fussy maintenance, and these will certainly accelerate the process. At its simplest, however, composting merely entails giving your organic waste a place to decompose. As long as you are selective about what you add to the pot (e.g. no meat, dairy, oil), it's hard to go too far wrong with a compost stew!

Remember, decomposition occurs in nature all the time, so when we bring composting into our backyards, we're simply harnessing a natural process to give Mother Nature a helping hand. So, if you start small, take on only what you can manage, learn as you go, and most importantly, practice preventative maintenance by keeping out forbidden ingredients... Mother Nature will almost assuredly take care of the rest!

Are you writing a book right now? If so, can you give us a little teaser about it?

I'm just finishing the final edits on BRINGING THE OUTSIDE IN, to be published in February 2016. The story-in-rhyme follows some kids and their dog through the seasons, capturing their gleeful exploration of the great outdoors, and their exuberance as they arrive home, bringing with them evidence of their day's adventures:

“Worms in our clutches,
Wind in our hair,
Boots full of puddle,
Mud everywhere!”

With their escapades brought to life by the charming illustrations of [Patrice Barton](#), it's a picture book anthem encouraging kids to get outside and play.

That's awesome! As a mom, I feel like kids can never have too many books or too much outside play. Thank you so much, Mary, for taking the time to answer my questions and give my readers an opportunity a chance to win your lovely book.

Thank you, Alexis, for inviting me to share my thoughts with you and your readers, and keep up the great work spreading a little green in the world with Bean & Bee.