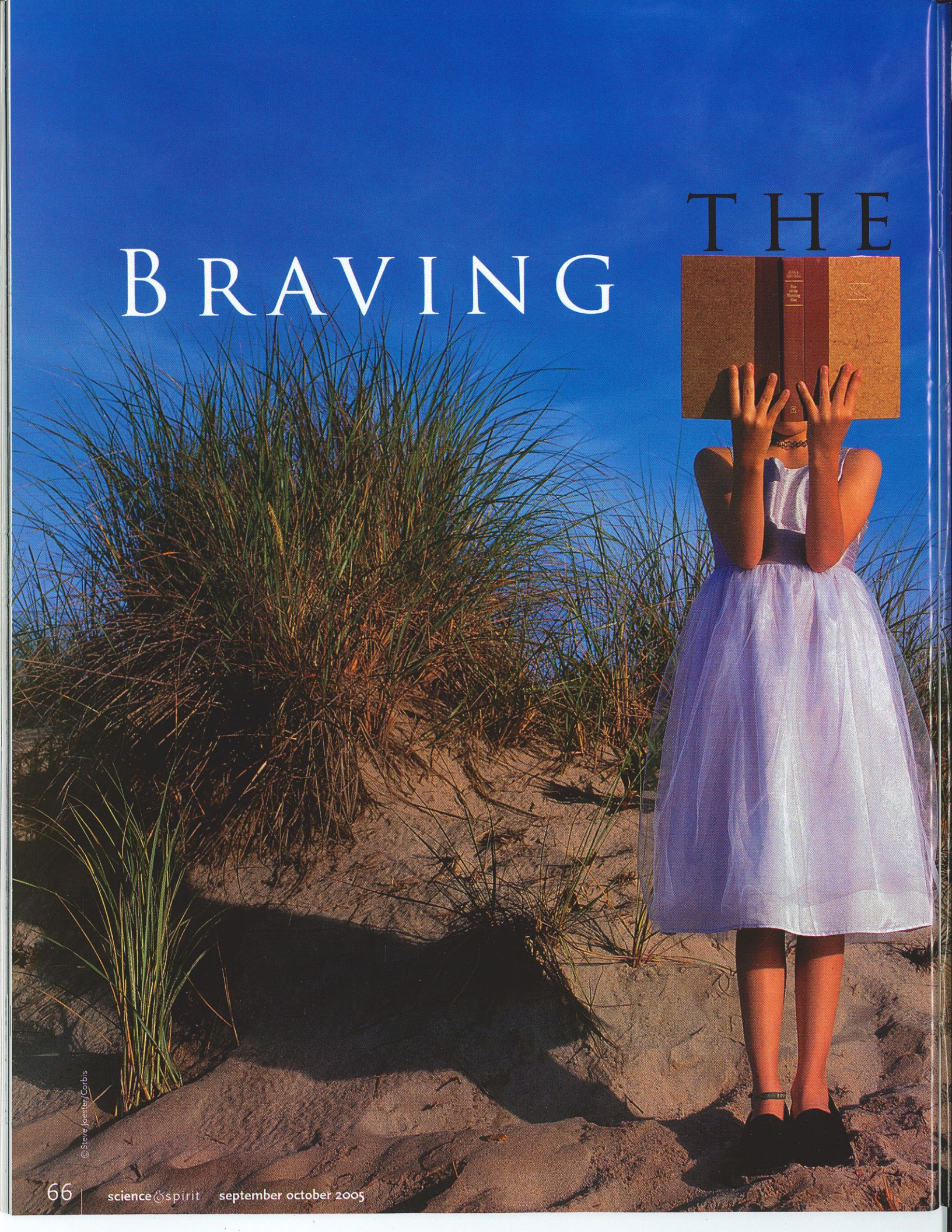
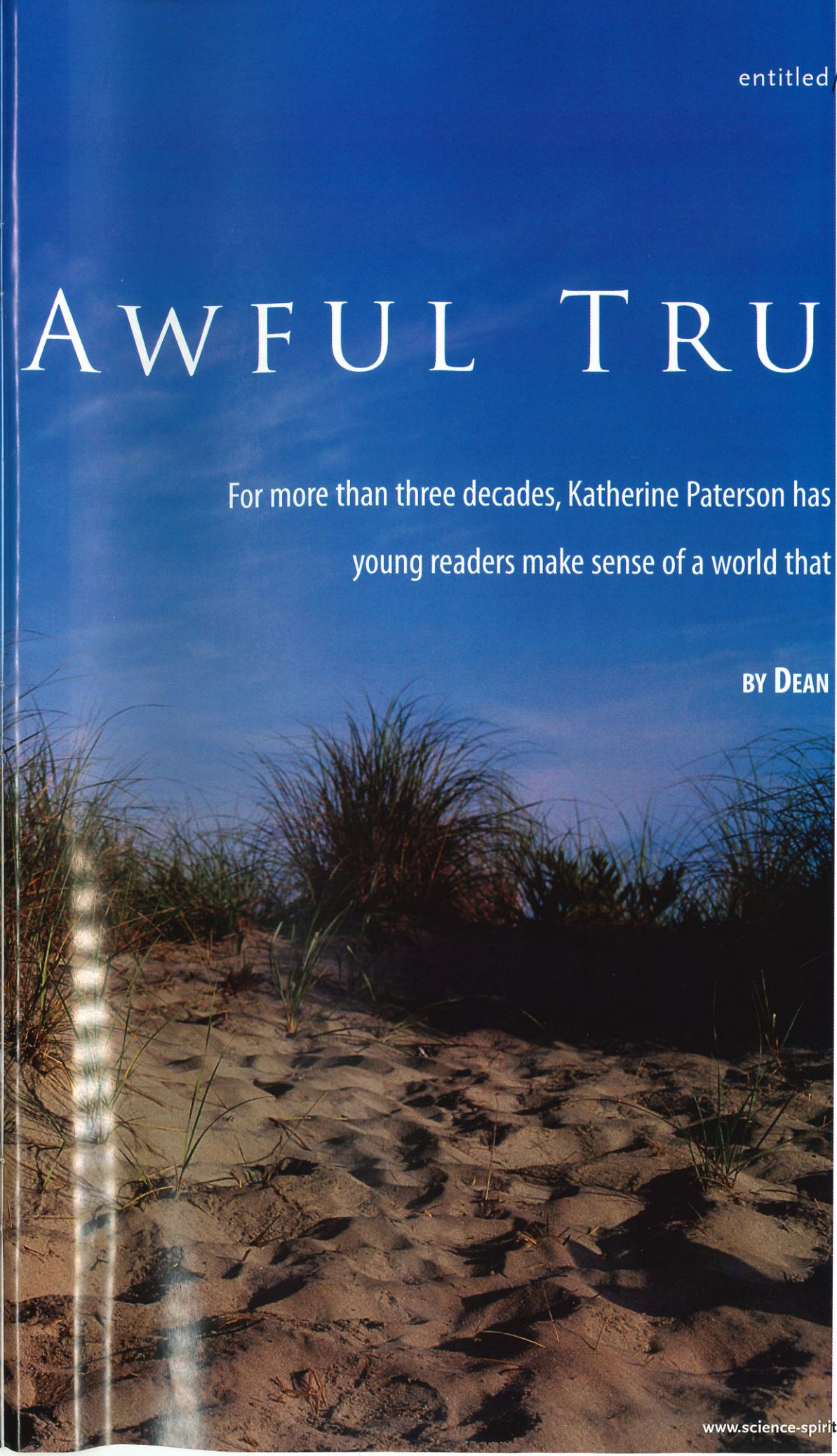
BRAVING THE



AWFUL TRUTH

For more than three decades, Katherine Paterson has helped young readers make sense of a world that is not always kind.

BY DEAN NELSON



"ANYONE WHO WRITES down to children is simply wasting his time," E.B. White once declared. "You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly."

American author Katherine Paterson has made a career of showing life's pain and sadness to her young readers. In her novel *The Same Stuff as Stars*, the main character, an eleven-year-old girl named Angel, is abandoned by her father and mother, although she becomes connected to the bigger story of the universe through her friendship with an astronomer she meets in the woods. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, perhaps Paterson's most famous book, a boy named Jess struggles with guilt, shame, loss, and anger at God for the death of his best friend. In an anthology of essays on her writings called *Bridges for the Young: The Fiction of Katherine Paterson*, editors Joel D. Chaston and M. Sarah Smedman call Paterson a realist, a prophet, and "a disturber of complacency." Paterson's works often have been criticized for their painfully serious themes; some have been banned by school districts and libraries. But Paterson, who has won more than sixty literary awards for her thirty-five books, says she is merely being honest with an audience that deserves her candor.

"I am a writer for children, a person who tries to help make meaning," she says. "But we can't make meaning for anyone, much less the young, unless we first are willing to tell them the truth. My books give kids permission to have real feelings instead of the false feelings people try to impose on them."

Paterson's philosophy stems, at least in part, from her own childhood experiences of not fitting in, or feeling she was different from those around her. Her parents served as missionaries in China, and, as she made sense of the surrounding culture, she often felt herself an outsider. Now in her seventies, Paterson lives in Vermont with her husband, a Presbyterian minister. They have raised four children, two of whom are adopted, and are grandparents to seven. Paterson has the enthusiasm and energy of an elementary schoolteacher, and conversation

RULERS OF A SECRET LAND

JESS AND LESLIE took turns swinging across the gully on the rope. It was a glorious autumn day, and if you looked up as you swung, it gave you the feeling of floating. Jess leaned back and drank in the rich, clear color of the sky. He was drifting, drifting like a fat white lazy cloud back and forth across the blue.

"Do you know what we need?" Leslie called to him. Intoxicated as he was with the heavens, he couldn't imagine needing anything on Earth.

"We need a place," she said, "just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it." Jess came swinging back and dragged his feet to a stop. She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "It might be a whole secret country," she continued, "and you and I would be rulers of it."

Her words stirred inside of him. He'd like to be a ruler of something. Even something that wasn't real. "OK," he said. "Where could we have it?"

"Over there in the woods where nobody would come and mess it up."

There were parts of the woods that Jess did not like. Dark places where it was almost like being underwater, but he didn't say so.

"I know"—she was getting excited—"it could be a magic country like Narnia, and the only way you can get in is by swinging across on this enchanted rope." Her eyes were bright. She grabbed the rope. "Come on," she said. "Let's find a place to build our castle stronghold."

They had gone only a few yards into the woods beyond the creek bed when Leslie stopped.

"How about right here?" she asked.

"Sure," Jess agreed quickly, relieved that there was no need to plunge deeper into the woods. He would take her there, of course, for he wasn't such a coward that he would mind a little exploring now and then farther in amongst the ever-darkening columns of the tall pines. But as a regular thing, as a permanent place, this was where he would choose to be—here where the dogwood and redbud played hide and seek between the oaks and evergreens, and the sun flung itself in golden streams through the trees to splash warmly at their feet.

with her is punctuated frequently by her deep, throaty laughter. But she becomes serious when the subject turns to life's hardships, for which she believes books are a form of preparation.

"Often, people tell me they have given *Bridge to Terabithia* to a child who has suffered some terrible loss," she says. "When they do, I want to say, 'Too late, too late.' The time a child needs a book about life's dark passages is before he or she has had to experience them. We need practice with loss, rehearsal for grieving, just as we need preparation for decision making."

It was a painful personal experience—her own family's brutal confrontation with mortality—that tuned Paterson in to the need for such practice and inspired *Bridge to Terabithia*. When Paterson's son David was eight years old, he was both the class artist and class clown in his elementary school. But when that school closed and the children were transferred to a nearby community school, his gifts and personality were deemed "stupid" and "weird" by his new peers. Life was nearly unbearable until he became friends with Lisa, who loved art and animals and baseball as much as he did. Life was good again. That summer, though, in a freak accident, Lisa was killed by a bolt of lightning. A few months later, David said to his mother after his prayers, "I know why Lisa died. It's because God hates me. It's because I'm bad. God killed her. Probably he's going to kill Mary [his sister] next. Then, he's going to kill you and Dad." Paterson wondered how she could help David understand Lisa's death, when she could not make sense of it herself.

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"Sure," he repeated himself, nodding vigorously. The underbrush was dry and would be easy to clear away. The ground was almost level. "This'll be a good place to build."

Leslie named their secret land "Terabithia," and she loaned Jess all of her books about Narnia, so he would know how things went in a magic kingdom—how the animals and the trees must be protected and how a ruler must behave. That was the hard part. When Leslie spoke, the words rolling out so regally, you knew she was a proper queen. He could hardly manage English, much less the poetic language of a king.

But he could make stuff. They dragged boards and other materials down from the scrap heap by Miss Bessie's pasture and built their castle stronghold in the place they had found in the woods. Leslie filled a three-pound coffee can with crackers and dried fruit and a one-pound can with strings and nails. They found five old Pepsi bottles which they washed and filled with water, in case, as Leslie said, "of siege."

Like God in the Bible, they looked at what they had made and found it very good.

"You should draw a picture of Terabithia for us to hang in the castle," Leslie said.

"I can't." How could he explain it in a way Leslie would understand, how he yearned to reach out and capture the quivering life about him and how when he tried it, it slipped past his fingertips, leaving a dry fossil on the page? "I just can't get the poetry of the trees," he said.

She nodded. "Don't worry," she said. "You will someday."

He believed her because there in the shadowy light of the stronghold everything seemed possible. Between the two of them, they owned the world, and no enemy, Gary Fulcher, Wanda Kay Moore, Janice Avery, Jess' own fears and insufficiencies, nor any of the foes whom Leslie imagined attacking Terabithia, could ever really defeat them.

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Her commitment to write honestly about the horror of losing a friend is what makes *Bridge to Terabithia* so raw, so powerful, and so believable. The book won the Newbery Medal in 1978, despite criticism that its theme was inappropriate for children. To this assessment, Paterson responds: "Death comes. A lot of children have read it and said, 'I didn't know it was OK to be angry.'"

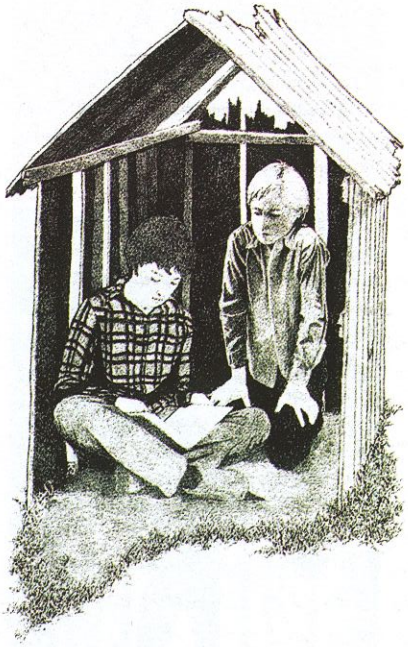
While Paterson draws heavily from life's harsh realities in her writing and believes that stories help transform chaos to order and meaninglessness to meaning, she resists the notion that there is a *specific* meaning, or moral, to her stories.

"Adults are reluctant to let young people determine their own meaning," she says. "But writers tell their stories and invite the readers to help create the meaning. There is co-creation at work. A morality tale has a meaning explicit, and it's the reader's job to get it. A story invites the reader to make the meaning. And you come to the meaning you need at that time in your life."

Fourth-grade readers of *Bridge to Terabithia* generally focus on the funny parts and rarely mention the death, she says, while sixth-graders might mention the death, but tend to focus on the friendship between Jess and Leslie. Readers in eighth grade, though, want to talk almost exclusively about the death.

"The imagination of the reader enriches the story," Paterson says. "But imagination is so wild. You can't tame it, and that's what makes people afraid of it. We're afraid of what we can't control. Reading allows a person to go off on some tangent, and our tendency is to pull on the leash."

Unfortunately, it is precisely the activities that demand imagination that are subject to modern society's budget cuts, she points out. A 2004 study by the Council for Basic Education showed that twenty-five percent of public elementary schools had reduced arts education, and that thirty-three percent anticipated future reductions, in favor of time spent preparing students to take standardized tests. "I know the argument: 'If our children don't master the basics, or math or computers or whatever, how will we be able to maintain our position as number one in the world?'" says Paterson. "But we already know what happens when our goal is knowledge for the sake of power: the eugenics and efficient annihilations of an Auschwitz, the firebombing of a Dresden, the instantaneous vaporization of a Hiroshima. Knowledge has not made our world a safer place, much less a better place or a more beautiful place.



IT IS THE BEST STORIES, PATERSON BELIEVES, THAT HELP YOUNG READERS FILTER THE WORLD AND FIND SENSE AND MEANING IN IT.

"Libraries, art and music programs—you're not a full human being if this side of you doesn't flourish," she continues. "Developing these aspects is important for developing wisdom and judgment. And the wisdom of the ages is in books."

By inviting readers to step into the shoes of others, books help to foster empathy, a critical component of growth. In his 2002 book, *The Child That Books Built: A Life in Reading*, British essayist Francis Spufford writes that the books we read as children are perhaps the most important ones we will read in our lives. "The words we take into ourselves help to shape us," he wrote. "They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us, and the related borders of what's acceptable. ... They build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination."

As a young person, Paterson's imagination was stretched by Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country,* which, although set in South Africa, allowed her to imagine what life might have been like for blacks in America. "I never saw the American South as anything except as a white person until I was forced to walk in the shoes of a black man," she says. "A child's sense of justice and morality can be seen in the lives of fictional characters."

This explains, perhaps, why Paterson so fervently opposes sugarcoated treatments of the world. In her 2001 book of essays, *The Invisible Child*, Paterson writes that children's authors are often advised: "'Write nice books ... Write books that will make children virtuous. Avoid controversy. Don't write books that make children question authority or things as they are.'"

But heeding such advice, in Paterson's view, would not only be useless, but also would do young readers a disservice. "The world our children live in, the one we cannot protect them from, is a world where evil and suffering and injustice are rampant," she says. "It is useless to pretend to children that all is well. A clear but foolish optimism strikes me as almost obscene."

It is the best stories, she believes, that help young readers filter the world and find sense and meaning in it. "Meaning in a story reflects our belief that there is meaning in the universe," she says. "No matter what disorder frames our lives, in the center—in the place that reveals who we are—there is order." ⊛