A. The Biography of Katherine Paterson

Katherine Paterson (born October 31, 1932) is an American author best known for children’s novels. For four different books published 1975 to 1980, she won two Newberry Medals and two National Book Awards. She is one of three people to win the two major international awards: for “Lasting Contribution to Children’s Literature”, she won the biennial Hans Christian Andersen Award for Writing in 1998. For her career contribution to “Children’s and Young Adult Literature in the Broadest Sense”, she won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award from the Swedish Arts Council in 2006, the biggest prize in children’s literature. In 2013, Paterson won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal from the American Library Association.
Early Life

She was born Katherine Womeldorf in Huai’an, Jiangsu, China, to Christian Missionaries George and Mary Womeldorf. Her father was a principal at Sutton 690, a school for girls, and traveled throughout China as part of his missionary duties. The Womeldorf family lived in a Chinese neighborhood and immersed themselves in Chinese culture. When Katherine was five years old, the family was forced to leave China during the Japanese invasion of 1937. The family moved to Richmond, Virginia for a short while before returning to China to live in Shanghai. In 1940, the family was forced to flee again, this time to North Carolina.

Paterson's first language was Chinese, and she initially experienced difficulty reading and writing English. She overcame these challenges and, in 1954, graduated summa cum laude with a degree in English from King College in Bristol, Tennessee. She then spent a year teaching at a rural elementary school in Virginia before going to graduate school. She received a Master's degree from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (Richmond, VA), where she studied Bible and Christian education. Paterson had hoped to be a missionary in China, but its borders were closed to western citizens. A Japanese friend pushed her to go to Japan instead, where she worked as a missionary and Christian education assistant. While in Japan,
Paterson studied both Japanese and Chinese culture, which influenced much of her subsequent writing. Paterson began her professional career in the Presbyterian Church by teaching Sunday school curriculum for fifth and sixth grade parochial students.

In 1966, she wrote the novel *Who Am I?*. While continuing to write, she was unable to get any of her novels published. After being persuaded, Paterson took an adult education course in creative writing during which her first novel was published. Her first children's novel, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, was published in 1976. A Japanese fairy tale, it is based on Paterson's studies in Japan. *Bridge to Terabithia*, her most widely read work, was published in 1977. *Terabithia* was highly controversial due to some of the difficult themes. *Bridge to Terabithia* is among the most popular books she has written. Some of her other books also feature difficult themes such as the death of a loved one. Katherine Paterson is currently vice-president of the National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance, a non-profit organization that advocates for literacy, literature, and libraries. Paterson lives in Barre, Vermont, with her husband, a retired pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. They have seven grandchildren.

On April 28, 2005, Paterson dedicated a tree in memory of Lisa Hill (her son David's childhood friend who became the inspiration for *Bridge to Terabithia*) to Takoma Park Elementary School. Paterson still
does school visits but chooses to stick to schools that are close to her Vermont home. She is currently promoting her work and just put out a new book entitled *Bread and Roses Too*. She was inspired to write this book after seeing a photograph of 35 children taken on the steps of the Old Socialist Labor Hall in Barre captioned, "Children of Lawrence Massachusetts, Bread and Roses Strike come to Barre". She has written a play version of the story by Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*. It was performed at a conference of the Beatrix Potter Society in Fresno, CA in April 2009.

In January 2010, Paterson replaced Jon Scieszka as the Library of Congress National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, a two-year position created to raise national awareness of the importance of lifelong literacy and education.

In January 2013, Paterson received the biennial Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal from the American Library Association, which recognizes a living author or illustrator whose books, published in the United States, have made "a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children".

**Writing style**

In Paterson's novels, her youthful protagonists face crises by which they learn to triumph through self-sacrifice. Paterson, unlike
many other authors of young adult novels, tackles themes often considered to be adult, such as death and jealousy. Although her characters face dire situations, Paterson writes with compassion and empathy. Amidst her writing of misery and strife, Paterson interlaces her writing with wry wit and understated humor. After facing tumultuous events, her characters prevail in triumph and redeem themselves and their ambitions. Paterson's protagonists are usually orphaned or estranged children with only a few friends who must face difficult situations largely on their own. Paterson's plots may reflect her own childhood in which she felt estranged and lonely.

*Bridge to Terabithia* has been adapted into film twice, the 1985 PBS version and the 2007 Disney/Walden Media co-production version. One of the producers and screenwriters for the latter version was Paterson's son David L. Paterson, whose name appears on the dedication page of the novel.

Another of her novels, *The Great Gilly Hopkins* has been optioned by Arcady Bay Entertainment, and an upcoming 2011 fantasy-novel release *The Flint Heart* has been optioned by Bedrock Films.
B. The Summary of the Novel

Jess Aarons is an eleven-year-old boy living in a rural area of the South who loves to run. He dreams of being the fastest boy in the fifth grade when school starts up in the fall, feeling that this will for once give him a chance to stand in the spotlight among his five sisters, and might win him the attention of his preoccupied father. Jess is quite insecure in his identity. He loves to paint and draw, but he knows very well that this labels him a "sissy" in the eyes of most of the world, particularly his father. In addition, his family is stretched so tight by poverty that he has little chance to really explore his own identity during this crucial period of adolescence. He has therefore built up the importance of winning in his mind, feeling that here, at least, is something that he is good at which won't win him an undesired label of "sissy" or "girl" in the eyes of his father or schoolmates, and which will allow him to shine in his own right. He practices each morning, always dreaming of his upcoming victory. However, when the races come around at recess, a new girl, Leslie Burke, who just moved next door to Jess, boldly crosses to the boys' side of the playground and beats everyone.

A rather unpromising beginning, but Jess and Leslie become fast friends. They build a secret fantasyland across the creek in the woods, called Terabithia, where they play all the time. There they
forget the rest of the world, such as the kids at school or Jess's less-than-satisfactory family. The time they spend in Terabithia, in fact, seems to strengthen them for these trials of everyday life: it is there that they map out a plan of revenge on the school bully when she steals May Belle's Twinkies, and it is there that they discuss Jess's feelings of insecurity when Leslie begins to draw closer to her father. Leslie also introduces Jess to the world of imagination and creativity, telling him the stories of such classics of literature as *Moby Dick* and *Hamlet*. All this also strengthens Jess's artistic talent and ability, as Leslie supports his ambition and, through the stories she tells, provides him with great subject matter. But much of the time they play wonderful games of their own invention—defeating intruders on Terabithian territory, praying to the Spirits of the Grove to end a long spell of rain, and numerous other fantasies.

However, Jess and Leslie's friendship, though centered in Terabithia, is not limited to Terabithia. They see each other at school, where they take a good deal of ribbing for their cross-gender friendship, but by now that sort of teasing has lost the power to hurt Jess, and Leslie has never been particularly bothered by what others think. At home, they celebrate holidays together, such as Christmas, when Jess gives Leslie a puppy and she gives him an expensive art set to develop his artistic talent, and Easter, when Leslie goes to church for the first time with Jess. Leslie is impressed by the beauty of the
story of Christ. Jess and his little sister May Belle, cowed by negative and unforgiving religious training, are convinced that nonbelievers such as Leslie are doomed to hell, and find the whole experience disturbing. Nevertheless, Jess and Leslie remain the best of friends, and Jess finds a purpose in his life through Leslie's company that he's never had before.

One day the music teacher at school, Miss Edmunds, whom Jess has long had a crush on, invites him to spend a day with her touring the art galleries in Washington. This trip does much to expand his mind and make him feel as if he is special, a feeling he has previously only had in Leslie's company. Jess has a perfect day, but when he gets home he is told that Leslie drowned in the creek that morning trying to swing into Terabithia on the rope that they used for that purpose. Jess is completely devastated and goes through the stages of grief—denial, anger, fear, and sorrow—all incredibly painful to suffer and, indeed, to read about. Initially, he does not see how he is to go on initially. Leslie has raised him to new heights as the king of Terabithia, and now he feels that without her, he has no choice but to revert to the old Jess, plagued by fear and insecurity. However, eventually he realizes that he can only keep Leslie's memory, and his own newfound sense of self, alive by continuing the fantasy of Terabithia. He brings his little sister May Belle there and makes her its new queen, assuring that a part of Leslie will live on as well.