

MG Author Mary Alice Monroe On How to Help Change the World with Fictional Stories

by Mary Alice Monroe

Jul 06, 2021 | Filed in News & Features



Photo by Anne Rhett Photography

I am a storyteller. I dive into the lives of my characters, spin a tale, send them on a journey and by the end, hopefully inspire. Yet, the *why* of my writing, the backdrop for all my novels, is to help readers become aware of issues facing endangered species through the craft of creating "story worlds" that identify important parallels between nature and human nature. That seems straightforward if you're writing nonfiction, but how do you pull that off as a fiction writer?

A writer's goal is to create an authentic story world. To do that successfully, the writer must remember that the bedrock of your story world is setting. It is the guidepost for me when I'm developing a story. Setting plays a pivotal role

because when done correctly, it will enhance the storyline, characters, themes, and even mood of a novel.

Twenty years ago, I made a conscious decision to use my books as a force for good. I was, and still am, a sea turtle volunteer and I wanted to help my readers become aware of serious threats for the loggerhead sea turtles while simultaneously creating a story world that would connect them emotionally to the animals. To do this, I began a new process wherein rather than depend on an existing idea, I used what I learned about the species from research and personal experience to create a story that would bring the issues to life through vivid setting, compelling dialogue, strong themes, and fully realized characterization all designed to enrich and deepen my message. Most importantly, emotional resonance is the hook that captures readers. This is what separates fiction from nonfiction.

Since that first book, *The Beach House*, I continued writing novels set against the protection of other endangered species. Academic and hands-on research are the bedrock of my craft. I spend hours doing interviews and working with animals to better understand the species and the people who work with them. No job is too dirty. I've cleaned many different kinds of animal dung

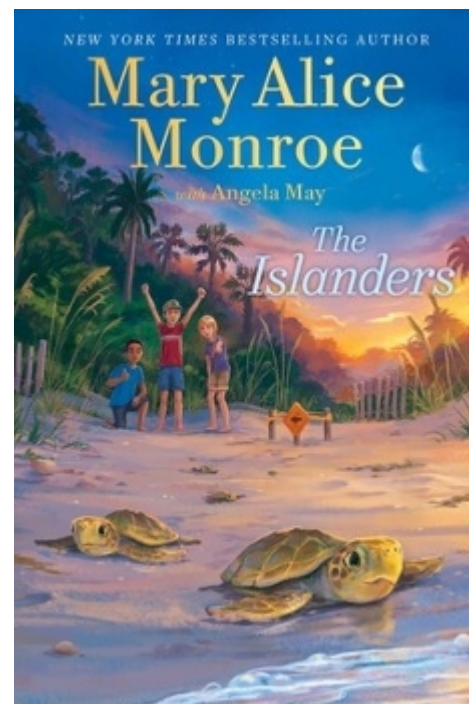
—did you know butterfly poop is called frass? I've rescued and rehabilitated sea turtles, water and shore birds, and the elusive birds of prey. I've trained dolphins, raised monarch butterflies, and worked to preserve sweetgrass in the south. As I work, I'm not only learning about a species, I'm creating hands-on experiences that allow my readers see the animals through the eyes of my characters. They feel my passion. This makes it personal, and authentic.

When I have completed my research, I take my volumes of notes and at last sit down to plot the novel. I never want to overwhelm the reader with facts, or to proselytize. My intent is to create a fully developed story world guided by the flora or fauna of a setting that fascinates me. Ultimately, when the reader finishes the novel, they will feel that sense of satisfaction we all love after finishing a good book. And, if I've done my job, there is also the surprise that they learned something, too.

One of the greatest joys of my career is hearing from my readers how my stories have inspired them, or how they've learned so much about an animal. In my "Beach House" series, the backdrop of the nesting cycle of sea turtles is the grounding element for the seven books. Readers tell me they learned so much about sea turtles. Some are inspired to do beach sweeps; others make donations to rescue facilities, aquariums, and zoos to help to protect their favorite species. I have readers who have joined their local turtle teams, and volunteer in local organizations. This is the power of story—opening eyes and inspiring action.

Years ago, I published my first children's picture books with the same mindset to inspire readers—this time the youngest ones. While speaking at schools, I was impressed by the enthusiasm and faith in children ages eight to 12 that they can make a difference. Since then it has been my dream to write for this group of young readers. After all, these are the stewards of tomorrow. I wanted to pass on a story to them that would help them discover the wonder and magic of what is living in the real world.

On June 15th, my dream will come true with the debut of *The Islanders*, the first of an adventure series written with my colleague Angela May. The story is told through the voice of 11-year-old Jake who must spend his summer living with his grandmother on a remote barrier island. This army brat from New Jersey meets Macon, an African American boy from a wealthy suburb of Atlanta, and Lovie, a girl from the local islands. Turtles again take center stage as these three unlikely friends find themselves unplugged. Together they explore the exciting and beautiful wilderness of a remote island.



Whether I'm writing for adults or for children, I hope my books will be a launching pad of inspiration and a call to action. My mantra for environmental fiction writing is: "Once you know, you care, and then you take care." Combining my passion for conservation with my ability to write compelling stories is the best way I know to create positive change in our world. To make a difference. As writers, we have the power to inspire positive change through the power of story.

Mary Alice Monroe is a New York Times bestselling author of 27 books, including her new middle grade book series, The Islanders, and her new adult fiction novel, The Summer of Lost and Found. Learn more at www.maryalicemonroe.com

Mary Alice Monroe

middle grade

activism

conservation

coming of age

realistic fiction

environmental fiction

Angela May