



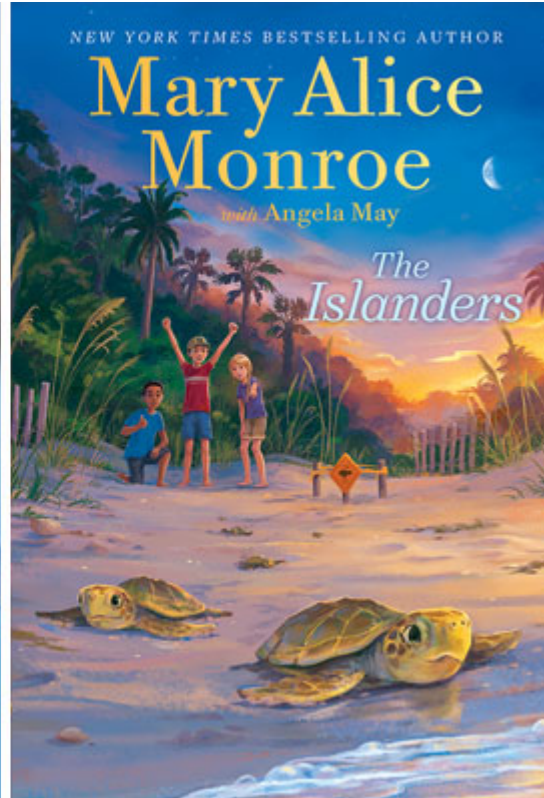
Home > Children's > Authors

Designer - Albert Whitman - Park Ridge, IL.

NEXT JOB ▶

Q & A with Mary Alice Monroe

By Ingrid Roper | Jun 03, 2021



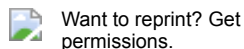
*Bestselling adult author Mary Alice Monroe is launching a new middle grade series, *The Islanders*, co-written with journalist Angela May. The series is set on the idyllic nature preserve of Dewees Island, S.C., near where the authors themselves live. In the first book, the protagonist Jake goes to spend the summer on the island with his eccentric conservationist grandmother Honey after his military officer father is injured in Afghanistan. Though Jake fears it will be excruciating without friends and technology, he soon forms an unlikely triumvirate with another visiting kid, a fact-loving kid from Atlanta, and a local girl with expert knowledge of boats and the inner workings of the community. PW spoke with Monroe via Zoom about writing for children, working with a co-author, her passion for the land, and her turtle preservation work that informs a major thread in the novel.*

You are a successful adult author and previously published two children's books. What made you decide to write a middle grade series?

RELATED STORIES:

- [More in Children's -> Authors](#)

- More in Authors -> Interviews
- More in articles by Ingrid Roper



FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

 PW Daily Tip Sheet[More Newsletters](#)

The first person to suggest it was Kwame Alexander. I'm such a fan of his work and talent, and I was honored to be asked. I see this audience as the young environmental stewards of tomorrow that I want to reach, so it was a sudden yes. And writing for children wasn't new for me—I'd written two picture books, *Turtle Summer* and *A Butterfly Called Hope*. When I brought those picture books into the schools and worked with children, it was that middle grade age group that wowed me. That's the age when kids believe they can do anything and be anything. You ask a 10-year-old what they want to be when they grow up, and they answer both a ballerina and a judge. And I also work on the beach with kids with the turtle preservation team, and they absolutely believe they can change the world.

I also wrote a book called *A Low Country Christmas* which has a 10-year-old boy, and that voice just bubbled out so I knew I could write it. I'm with Simon & Schuster and I talked to Aladdin and we decided to do the series. My editor, Alyson Heller, is so supportive. But it was Kwame who really got things off the ground.

I knew exactly what I wanted to say and the story came together easily. I always tell people [about the characters in *The Islanders*] that these are three unlikely friends, and on the other side of the ferry ride they probably wouldn't have come together at all. But it's *Lord of the Flies* without the violence. They're thrown together on this island and they have no choice but to at least get to know each other.

Given your ample experience writing fiction, why did you choose to work with a co-author? How did you go about selecting that partner, and what was your collaborative process like?

When I knew I wanted to write the series, I talked to Angela May who worked as my publicist and assistant for 10 years. I knew she was a great writer with a great voice.

The best part is we went to [the setting of] Dewees Island to write it. We both dream of living there. There is no place like it. You're bumping along in your little golf cart and you turn around and there are six alligators lying on the water just sunning and then you look up and there's an eagle's nest. There's just so much to see all the time. And there are no cars and no stores; it's a real nature preserve. That's why I created a page on my website where we link to nature walks and offer other information. We're going to continue to find ways to bring the island to life for readers.

I've always resisted [working with a collaborator] in the past. I have my own strong voice and opinions. But I wanted to balance it with the pressures of writing an adult novel a year. Angela was someone I particularly trusted. And we shared what was really the heart of this book—the love of land and the love of what's wild.

My goal in this book was to help children not be afraid of wild. I want them to be able to identify and name what is around them. I want them to trust their instincts and get off the beaten path a little. These children in the book think they're going to have the worst summer ever without technology. But once you unplug them the best thing that happens is that they begin to explore.

Your main character in *The Islanders*, Jake, comes to live with his grandmother, Honey. What inspired that relationship?

I am a grandmother now and that's a beautiful experience. And I wanted that relationship to be mutually supportive. In the first iterations, she was this cheery grandmother welcoming her grandson to her island. But then that's boring. What's more realistic is she had lost her husband. Her son was injured. She was the nature lady on the island who just started to have the dwindles. The house was messy and I love how she has spoiled food in her refrigerator. That

actually is from a personal experience of mine with someone I know. No author writes in a vacuum; you use everything you live. So there Jake is thinking, “Don’t eat that sandwich! Sniff it first.” And those qualities gave Honey depth. But I love that she gave Jake the journal [of his father’s] which is so important in the book. She created a connection to his father as a boy when Jake really missed him. And then Honey advised him to start his own nature journal. She made it game-like. And that’s the secret. It’s not having to learn, but wanting to learn. You know that Jake is going to be looking at birds and trees for the rest of his life. That’s why both Angela and I felt very strongly about the idea of a journal in the book as a tool that would offer a quiet lesson for the characters to start to write down their ideas, or even to draw them. And it brought Honey out. It reminded her of her strengths. I think all people, young and old, need purpose in life. And the children gave Honey purpose.

You serve as a member of the island turtle team and dedicate a lot of time to saving loggerhead sea turtles. How did you get involved as a volunteer with this cause? And how did your own experience inform this aspect *The Islanders*?

My sister is an artist who lives in Florida and there are a lot of turtles in Florida. That’s the turtle mecca. And she described to me in beautiful terms how she was having a dinner party and a turtle came to shore and someone noticed it, and being Floridians they were mindful and quiet and they watched the turtle laying her eggs. I was in Washington, D.C., at the time, so not a lot of turtles for me in D.C. But she described to me the how the female wept tears. And when I heard that it was like my energy started to ramp up, like my blood started to boil, and I knew I was on to something. It was instinctive.

Twenty-two years ago, the first thing I did when I moved here to South Carolina was to join the island turtle team. I got my permit from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to monitor the nests. Now I’m on the board in Costa Rica with the big leatherback turtles. I’ve worked with turtles around the world. It’s a lifelong passion. I’ve moved on to other species, too, but the turtles are the one species I never let go of. And it seems to be an iconic animal for children. Turtles are synonymous with so many qualities, including resilience. In *The Islanders* I knew there were going to be turtles and that the species would be paramount for these kids.

You are the co-creator and co-producer of a weekly web show called Friends and Fiction that profiles books and authors. Though you usually focus on adult titles, have you considered featuring *The Islanders*?

I’m so excited. We are going to launch *The Islanders* on June 16 and Sy Montgomery is joining us. And then Kwame Alexander is coming in as a guest sometime in September. And we hope he may pop in during our launch. Our show airs every Wednesday night and the launch of *The Islanders* will be the beginning of bringing middle grade and young adult authors on our show. Our primary audience is adults, but parents are the gatekeepers for many books for kids, and we want them to know more about good new titles.

How do you balance writing your new middle grade series with writing adult fiction?

The first one [in the series] was difficult because of time constraints. The last book I wrote for adults, *The Summer of Lost and Found*, was particularly difficult because I was writing in real time and the setting of that book was the pandemic. In finding the time to write both books, I depended on Angela’s strong support. We outlined very fast. We both knew what we wanted to say. And we’ve already got the second book all sketched out so it will be done much more efficiently.

Can you give any hints about what’s coming next in the series?

The three friends return to the island, and it's about connection, and revisiting the past to discover the future. The father and son relationship takes precedence because now we have a father who is coming to grips with having lost his leg and his career. But there's also the hunt for treasure, because South Carolina on Dewees Island is reported to have the real Blackbeard's treasure. And the kids are after it. It will be an adventure.

***The Islanders* by Mary Alice Monroe with Angela May. Aladdin, \$17.99 June 15 ISBN 978-1-5344-2727-3**