

WRITER'S DIGEST

Mary Alice Monroe: On Writing the Family Saga

Award-winning author Mary Alice Monroe discusses what it's like to draft a series that spans generations and storylines.

ROBERT LEE BREWER · MAY 9, 2021

More than 7.5 million copies of her books have been published worldwide, and she's earned numerous accolades and awards, including Induction into the South Carolina Academy of Authors' Hall of Fame; the Southwest Florida Author of Distinction Award; South Carolina Award for Literary Excellence; RT Lifetime Achievement Award; the International Book Award for Green Fiction, and the prestigious Southern Book Prize for Fiction. Her bestselling novel *The Beach House* is a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie.

Monroe is captivated by the beauty and fragility of the wild habitat around her. In particular, the coastal southern landscape became a strong and important focus of many of her novels. Monroe immerses herself in both academic research and hands-on/volunteering to learn about a species or conservation issue. Then, she uses the knowledge and experiences working with animals and wildlife experts to craft captivating stories that identify important parallels between nature and human nature. Bottlenose dolphins, monarch butterflies, shorebirds, and loggerhead sea turtles are among the wild species she has worked with and woven into her novels.

Monroe is an active conservationist and serves on the South Carolina Aquarium Board Emeritis, The Leatherback Trust, The Pat Conroy Literary Center Honorary Board, Friends of Coastal Carolina, and Casting Carolinas Advisory Board. She is especially proud to be a 20-year plus state-certified volunteer with the Island Turtle Team, the group that first sparked her love for loggerhead sea turtles, and is the inspiration of her *Beach House* series.

Monroe has also published two children's books, which complement the environmental themes she's known for in her novels. Monroe's first middle-grade book, *The Islanders*, will be released June 15, 2021.

Her latest novel, *The Summer of Lost and Found*, will be released nationwide May 11, 2021.

She is also a contributor to *Reunion Beach*, an upcoming anthology by several bestselling authors and writers as a tribute to the life and legacy of their friend *New York Times* bestselling author Dorothea Benton Frank.

Monroe is the co-creator and co-host of the weekly web show and podcast *Friends and Fiction* featuring the five bestselling authors Mary Kay Andrews, Kristy Woodson Harvey, Kristin Harmel, and Patti Callahan Henry with endless stories, special guests, and a way to connect readers and writers.

In this post, Monroe discusses what it's like to draft a series that spans generations and storylines and much more!

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Name: Mary Alice Monroe**Literary agent:** Faye Bender, The Book Group**Book title:** *The Summer of Lost and Found***Publisher:** Gallery Books**Release date:** May 11, 2021**Genre:** Literary fiction**Elevator pitch for the book:** The Beach House series continues with *The Summer of Lost and Found* as Mary Alice Monroe creates a family saga about relationships, courage, nature, and life lessons as the legacy passes from one generation to the next.**Previous titles by the author:**

The Beach House series

- *The Beach House*
- *Swimming Lessons*
- *Beach House Memories*
- *Beach House for Rent*
- *Beach House Reunion*
- *On Ocean Boulevard*
- *The Summer of Lost and Found*

Stand Alone

- *The Summer Guests*
- *A Lowcountry Christmas*
- *Last Light Over Carolina*
- *The Butterfly's Daughter*
- *Time is a River*
- *Sweetgrass*
- *Skyward*
- *The Book Club*
- *The Four Seasons*
- *Girl in the Mirror*
- *The Long Road Home*
- *One Summer's Night*
- *Second Star to the Right*

The Lowcountry Series

- *The Summer Girls*
- *The Summer Wind*
- *The Summer's End*
- *A Lowcountry Wedding*
- Children's Books
- *The Islanders (middle grade)*
- *A Butterfly Called Hope*
- *Turtle Summer*

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What prompted you to write this book?

My novels center around a woman's life—family sagas. What could be more interesting to write about than the changes and challenges families faced with the phenomenon of forced isolation, friend and family pods, and the emotional and economic strains of the year 2020? I wanted to write about this phenomenon we were living in—not about the Covid-19 illness, but family dynamics. And how better than with a family I knew so well—the Rutledge family of The Beach House series.

[\(10 Tips For Writing a Family Drama Novel\)](#)

How long did it take to go from idea to publication?

I wrote this novel in real-time—and yes, the idea changed continually during the process. It was a roller coaster journey! I write from structure, and I did begin with an outline. The problem came when living through the weeks and months of the pandemic year, my perspective kept changing. I threw out my outline. What I wanted to say in April was different in July and changed again in November. Rewrite followed rewrite. I pulled my hair out, cursed the characters, the story, swore I would never do this again. It was a long, arduous process. By the year's end, however, I read my novel for the last time, tweaked the final words, and smiled with satisfaction. My story was told.

Were there any surprises or learning moments in the publishing process for this title?

I had a new editor for this book, and I was naturally concerned about our new working relationship. As it turned out, we worked beautifully together with patience and positivity. But as I said, writing a book in real-time rather than having a story structure was agonizing for me as a writer. Her challenge was to edit all my rewrites as the year progressed. In the end, we both felt the book spoke about the heart of the book—what was lost in 2020, but also what joys and lessons were learned.

[\(On Writing Dysfunctional Families\)](#)

Were there any surprises in the writing process for this book?

There were many! 2020 was a year like no other. We have never been in a pandemic before. Necessarily, my perspective changed as I lived through the months of relative isolation and observed what was happening in my own home and in homes around the nation. After the original shock and fear of a global shutdown, we went through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Our defense strategies shifted to coping strategies. As my experiences changed, so did what I wanted to say in the novel.

Perhaps that was the biggest surprise. At the ending, I realized that despite the frustrations and limitations, there were unexpected joys, new patterns and habits developed, bursts of creativity, and memories forged that might not have otherwise happened. Learning this myself, I could create scenes in the novel that were illuminating and hopefully inspirational.

The character focus also changed. Initially, I was introducing a new, young generation of a well-loved family in The Beach House series. As the year and the story progressed, I recognized that the problems of 2020 were different for the older generation than the younger. Two sides of the same coin. The young lost jobs, didn't date, their lives were put on hold. The older generation feared for their health and survival. Yet with an eye to loved ones, they helped with wisdom, love, and a place to live!

What do you hope readers will get out of your book?

I hope they appreciate that for all the hardships of 2020, there were some hard-won lessons of joy, too. Life is to be lived in the moment. Plans cannot be made without knowing one just might have to pivot. I hope after reading the novel, readers hug their loved ones and go outdoors and appreciate the beauty that surrounds them, even—or perhaps especially—if it's in their own backyard.

If you could share one piece of advice with other authors, what would it be?

Allow yourself the rough first draft. Chisel the hard marble. Get the story out, its shape and form. Release your emotions and find out what it is you want to say in the novel. In your subsequent drafts, you can pull out your tool belt, listen to select critiques, and use your craft to hone the novel into a finished piece of art.

