

SAMPLE Q&A WITH LAURA ANNE BIRD

We first met Jack Wilson in your debut novel. Why did you decide to give him his own book?

It was easy for me to pin Jack as the troublemaker in early drafts of *Crossing the Pressure Line*, but as I developed my manuscript, I really began to wonder what made him tick—because behind every bully is someone who’s hurting.

I started fleshing out Jack’s home life, giving him a dad who’s always at work and a mom who has passed away from cancer. Unlike many kids in the Northwoods, Jack doesn’t love hunting or fishing, which means he feels like he doesn’t belong. He has no hobbies, siblings, or consistent support, so it makes sense that he is a mess. (See? When you start peeling back the layers, you discover lots of things about a person that lead to greater empathy.)

The more I developed Jack’s backstory (in my head, anyway), the more I knew I wanted to focus on him in my second book, so I added little breadcrumbs for myself and readers in *Crossing the Pressure Line*, like on page 241: “Clare felt sorry to see Jack go. He was like a shadowy, solitary character in a novel that she wanted to keep reading.”

That novel, of course, would become *Marvelous Jackson*.

Why is Jack’s story important and relevant for middle grade readers?

So many kids feel like they don’t fit in. Whether these feelings come from not looking like everybody else, or acting like everybody else, or having what everybody else has, they’re legitimate and real.

As soon as Jack lands on a hobby—one in which he excels, and one that brings him new friends and deep comfort—he develops a much stronger sense of identity and finally begins to feel at home in his world. I hope that Jack inspires readers to try new things and stretch themselves, even if it feels scary at first.

Jack’s shift in perspective occurs as he finds self-confidence in the kitchen. Do you love to bake?

I don’t love to bake at all! I prefer cooking, where I can toss in random ingredients without measuring anything. I love it when *other* people bake, though. It’s amazing to watch how they transform the humblest of ingredients into something magnificent, creative, and delicious.

Did you choose baking deliberately to show that boys can flourish in the kitchen as much as or even more than girls?

When I was plotting out *Marvelous Jackson*, I thought a lot about what hobby to give Jack. I knew it needed to have nothing to do with sports or hunting, but I was stymied. Hip hop dancing? Painting? Chess?



Baking became my favorite option, because it felt both practical and entertaining, and I knew I could have lots of fun bringing in all the sprinkles, and scones, and frosting (which I did).

Yes, I do like playing around with societal expectations in my stories—shaking things up a little to show kids they're capable of anything, even if it goes against the stereotypes. Clare loves to fish in *Crossing the Pressure Line*, so why can't Jack fall in love with baking in *Marvelous Jackson*? If his journey motivates readers to question gender roles and stretch their comfort zones, I'll be pleased. (And if readers don't pick up on those dynamics, I'm fine with that, too!)

The Alwyn Public Library plays a prominent role in *Marvelous Jackson*. Why did you choose to set certain scenes there?

I placed Jack in the comforting and safe atmosphere of the library so that he could begin to heal from his loss and loneliness. I mean, who doesn't love the crinkling of newspapers, the quiet voices of patrons, and the warm, woody smell of books? Jack walks inside, and it all comes back to him in a rush.

I based Miss Jean Ann, my librarian character, on a real children's librarian by the same name who worked at the Wauwatosa Public Library when I was a little girl. I adored her. Her story time sessions were epic, and she planted many seeds in me that eventually sprouted into my deep love of literature.

Why did you choose Chicago as headquarters for *The Marvelous Midwest Kids Baking Championship*?

Chicago is one of the greatest food cities in the world, with a rich variety of cultures and cuisines. It's also home to some 50 James Beard Award winners and 22 Michelin-starred restaurants, so it felt natural to me that Jack would end up there.

I had a blast imagining how a kid from a small rural town would be both impressed and intimidated by Chicago, which of course is the biggest city in the Midwest. Indeed, Jack grows increasingly nervous the closer he gets to downtown, but he finds that everyone at the *MMKBC* studio is just as nice as the people back in Alwyn.

Interestingly, my debut novel, *Crossing the Pressure Line*, is about a girl from Chicago who leaves the city to spend a summer in northern Wisconsin. I love that Jack's story is the inverse: he's a boy from the Northwoods who's desperate to get to Chicago.

What about the role that Wisconsin food plays in *Marvelous Jackson*?

My state has a fabulous culinary tradition, too! In fact, it was on full display back in spring when Bravo TV produced *Top Chef Wisconsin*. Think pies and turnovers made with



Door County cherries, fried fish, cheese, specialty sausages, and other mouthwatering tavern food.

I wanted to celebrate dishes and ingredients like these, so I wove numerous food references into my book. “Nuggies,” however, aren’t necessarily a Wisconsin thing. My cousin, who’s a cook in St. Louis, introduced me to the concept. They are fried lumps of chicken that are bigger and wider than typical chicken fingers, nuggets, or drummies.

It was fun for me to imagine Jack’s small town rallying around a dish that’s so simple but so tasty. Norm throws himself into perfecting his spice blend to take his nuggies to the next level—and hopefully win the first-ever Northwoods nuggie competition.

You casually but deliberately introduce the fact that Lola and Theo Porter have two moms. What made you decide to introduce those characters?

Books should serve as mirrors and windows. This means readers need to see themselves reflected in stories—and be given an opening into a world beyond their own experience.

Real-life kids come from many different kinds of households, so it’s important to me to acknowledge this in my stories. My characters Lola and Theo, for instance, have two moms. I don’t make a big deal about it—because it’s *not* a big deal; it’s just the way their family is.

Also, Lola and Theo were adopted internationally, just like my own three children. Again, it’s not a big deal; it’s just the way our families were formed.

I hope that when kids read *Marvelous Jackson*, they’ll think, *Oh, the Porters are exactly like my family. Or, conversely, I don’t know any families with two moms or kids who were adopted, but the Porters are really cool.*

Jack himself evolves from being a kid who teases Lola and Theo about their differences to one who cherishes their friendship—and their moms. His journey toward greater empathy and acceptance follows his own appreciation of the things that make *him* unique, too.

Did you draw upon your own experience as a mom of a teenage boy to identify some of Jack’s not-so-great behavior?

My seventeen-year-old son is different than Jack, but I was absolutely inspired by his floppy hair and love of hoodies!

Fortunately, my son doesn’t struggle with anger, frustration, and loneliness like Jack does, but they’re both obsessed with eating sugar and maintaining a strong sense of independence. Also, there’s a “contrarian” nature to each of them that I, as a rule follower, am often baffled by.



Can you talk about your bakery collaboration?

Supporting local independent businesses is important to me, so I've partnered with three Wisconsin bakeries to bring *Marvelous Jackson* to life. Bloom Bake Shop (Madison), Tilly's (Rhinelanders), and MacReady Artisan Bread Company (Egg Harbor) each developed a recipe for the book.

Bloom Bake Shop came up with the recipe for Vanilla Blooms, Tilly's came up with Maple Blueberry Muffins, and MacReady Artisan Bread Company came up with Whimsydiddles. Each of the treats connects directly to my story, and the recipes are included at the end of *Marvelous Jackson*. Readers who pre-order the book will receive recipe cards as a thank-you gift.

Why did you give Jack three presidential names?

Jack was named by his late mom, a librarian obsessed with American history. I wanted both his name and his favorite childhood book (*The Illustrated & Entertaining Encyclopedia of U.S. Presidents*) to serve as tangible reminders that he had been loved. Through them, I could bring his mom, Jillian, a little closer.

I liked weaving a patriotic thread through the book. I think that people in positions of power, namely American presidents, need to wield their responsibility wisely. They don't have to be perfect, and they're allowed to make mistakes, but I believe to whom much is given, much is expected. The same goes for all of us, really, and Jack comes to understand this.

Is the fire at Norm's restaurant and his ensuing plan to rebuild it a metaphor?

The fire at Dutch's was inspired by a real-life fire that destroyed a popular restaurant in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin, in 2019. The owner of the restaurant decided to rebuild, and his new restaurant is fabulous. (To my relief, he still serves the best broasted chicken I've ever had.)

Of course Norm's fire is a metaphor—for facing life head-on and with courage. We all have to confront the unexpected, the tragic, the uncomfortable. It's upsetting when life throws us curveballs, but our only option is to take a deep breath, regroup, and forge onward.

There seems to be a strong sense of community in *Marvelous Jackson*. Why?

Marvelous Jackson highlights the importance of showing up for the people in your life: apologize to somebody when you've shattered their science project; eat the cookies they've so generously made for you; hold a baking bootcamp when they need to practice their skills.

Kids are the agents of action and change in *Marvelous Jackson*, but there are awesome adults who hover around the periphery of the story, too. This was intentional on my part,



because as grown-ups, we're *all* responsible for not letting young people fall between the cracks. As one of my favorite writers says, "There's no such thing as other people's children." I wanted *Marvelous Jackson* to illustrate a community coming together to support and nurture a kid on the brink of despair.

Is there a universal message in *Marvelous Jackson* that will resonate with readers, no matter their age or where they live?

Clare Burch gave me the foundation for *Marvelous Jackson* in a scene at the end of *Crossing the Pressure Line*: "She thought about all the lifeboats that had saved her that year: books, swimming, nature, friends, her family."

When *Marvelous Jackson* begins, Jack has no lifeboats, and he's a mess. He knows he needs to make some big changes, or he'll be in deep trouble. His ensuing journey is about taking risks, making mistakes, and figuring out what brings him a sense of hope and meaning. Ultimately, he learns that anything is possible, thanks to practice, persistence, and good friends. "They're the most important ingredients you'll ever need."

Whether readers are from suburban Minneapolis, Chicago's Bucktown, or the Upper Peninsula, I hope *Marvelous Jackson* inspires them to think about their own lifeboats and how they can use them to stay afloat during challenging times. Maybe they can even find joy along the way.

The chapter illustrations in *Marvelous Jackson* are charming. Do you think they enhance the reading experience?

Jayden Ellsworth is my ridiculously talented illustrator from Orange Hat Publishing who designed the front cover of the book, along with the chapter illustrations—because who doesn't enjoy finding little pictures throughout a novel? Yes, Jayden's sketches enhance the reading experience, because they give life to the objects that are crucial to my storyline. Case in point: you'll see just what a sulfur shelf mushroom looks like.

It's obvious that you harbor a deep love for the Midwest. Why is it important to you to base your stories in this region?

Many authors portray the Midwest as mere flyover country, which is beyond frustrating. We can do so much better. There are real people, kids, and families living here who want and deserve to see themselves vibrantly reflected in the pages of a book.

I was born and raised in Wisconsin, which is where I live to this day—very happily. I will always celebrate the Midwest as the gorgeous, diverse, and delightful place it is. In 2023, I co-founded the Great Midwest Book Group as a way of doing just this.



Why is middle grade fiction your sweet spot?

I love middle grade novels because they get to the heart of a tender, pivotal time, when kids are starting to figure out who, what, and *how* they want to be in the world. They long for independence, but they still want reassurance from family. They want to stand out from the crowd, but they still want to fit in. These competing values can collide like furious little atoms, which is tough in real life but fantastic for fiction.

Middle-grade novels might be written for kids, but their themes are universal and eternal, such as what it means to belong, why it's crucial to speak up against injustice, and how we become our own best cheerleaders.

Middle-grade novels encourage tolerance, acceptance, and compassion. They remind us that everybody struggles in different ways, so it's good to be kind—always.

Will there be a sequel to *Marvelous Jackson*?

I'm writing another stand-alone companion story that begins where *Marvelous Jackson* leaves off. My working title is *Warrior with Two Braids*.

Mavis Pogodinski is the eleven-year-old sister of Jack's longtime friend Mikey Pogodinski ("Pogo"). As we see in *Marvelous Jackson*, she's feisty and spirited.

When Mavis doesn't get the lead role in the Evergreen School play, she uses her acting skills for a different purpose as she attempts to save a stately old tree in downtown Alwyn from doom and destruction.

How is it working with Orange Hat Publishing?

I respect and adore Shannon Ishizaki and her team at Orange Hat. They're smart, creative, and dynamic, and our visions for *Marvelous Jackson* have aligned seamlessly—much like they did with *Crossing the Pressure Line*. I attribute this synergy to the fact that we're all based in Wisconsin and share many Midwestern sensibilities.

"I live in a small town in northern Wisconsin. Almost everybody here hunts and goes fishing, but I'm not into that kind of stuff. I don't love being outside, and I've got bad aim, so don't give me a slingshot unless you want me to shoot off one of your toes."

EXCERPT FROM *MARVELOUS JACKSON*

