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Our Only May Amelia

by Jennifer L. Holm

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Summary



The year is 1899, and May Amelia is the spunkiest 12-year-old in Washington State. She knows she can do anything her seven older brothers can do. So why does Papa keep trying to make her act like a proper young lady? Mama is about to have a baby and May Amelia is hoping it will be a girl so she won't be the only female born on the Nasel River.

When mean Grandmother Patience moves in with the family, it's more than May thinks she can take. But soon events take a turn for the worse, and May Amelia's own strength and the strength of her family is truly tested.



About the Author

Jennifer L. Holm is a Newberry Medal-winning author of historical fiction for young adult readers. Her books focus on young women in frontier America at the end of the 19th century.

She is the grandniece of Alice Amelia Holm, a Finnish-American girl born on the Nasel River in Washington State during the nineteenth century.

The recent discovery of her grandaunt's diary and her ancestors' adventures in the Pacific Northwest inspired the character of May Amelia.

Holm was raised in Pennsylvania with her five brothers. After completing school, she worked in television and began to write. **OUR ONLY MAY AMELIA** was her first book and the 2000 Newberry Honor Book. She also wrote the *Boston Jane* series of books. Ms. Holm produces television commercials and lives with her husband in Brooklyn.





Book Review

I'm a guy who lives in a farmhouse on a hillside amidst four women of various ages. If I count in all the warm-blooded critters on the farm, there are sixteen of "them" and three of "us"--a goofy male retriever named Samwise, a young and excitable male Nubian dairy goat, and me.

I serve on the Best Books for Young Adults committee which consists of fourteen female librarians and myself. I am represented by a female member of Congress, two female members of the US Senate, and a female member of the State Assembly. Often a Saturday afternoon will find another six to eight female schoolmates--friends of our girls--giggling and screaming around the farm.

Thus I kind of know what it feels like to be May Amelia.

"There's no accounting for luck, especially luck in getting brothers."

May Amelia is a twelve year old girl living in Washington State in 1899 with her parents and her seven brothers. There is not another girl in her neck of the woods with whom to play or commiserate. There are Indians, bears, cougars, logging camps, a school you reach by boat, and one more baby on the way.

Will this baby turn out to (finally) be another girl?

Jennifer Holm does a superb job of characterizing each of May Amelia's seven brothers. (One, Kaarlo, is technically a blood cousin--and a rather grumpy and rude one at that--who lives with them.)

I really like Isahiah who is in charge of the family herd of sheep. Having quietly named each of the sheep after one of their human neighbors--based upon the sheeps' faces and those of the neighbors'--there is a hysterical scene that follows Isahiah's opening a door and yelling, "Hurry! Mrs. Peterson has broken her back out in the south pasture," and May Amelia's dad then ordering another brother to fetch Mrs. Peterson's son Lonny on his way out there.

But the special brother--the one who is charged with keeping an eye on their sister, and is close to her age; is always there for her--is Wilbert.

"For every evil God sends to me he sends an angel and I know sure for certain that Wilbert is my guardian angel."

The vilest of those "gifts" turns out to be a grandmother from hell who comes to live with her family.

Through the series of adventures that together make up **OUR ONLY MAY AMELIA**, we get a real sense of the frontier that still existed in the Pacific

Northwest a mere hundred years ago. We also get the fascinating paradox of having most of the males in her life constantly chiding May Amelia to be a *proper young lady* while most of the grownup ladies around her are really pretty tough frontier women. And, finally, we get a lively portrait of a sister surrounded by brothers who is so often struggling to just be "one of the boys."

Richie Partington <http://richiespicks.com>

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/0807282340/002-8762934-7810458?_encoding=UTF8



Discussion Questions

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. A Finnish proverb opens the story of May Amelia, "If you don't go, you can't return." What does this mean to you?
2. May Amelia is the only girl in Nasel. How do you think that feels? In what ways does that effect her life?
3. What kind of person is Kaarlo? Why does he act the way he does? Why doesn't May Amelia get along with him? What does it take for her to finally call him brother?
4. Does Grandmother Patience's name fit her? How does she treat May Amelia? What is your view on hitting children as a form of discipline?
5. Which of May Amelia's brothers do you like best? Why?
6. Were Papa and Mama right to keep the fact that Kaarlo's parents were dead from him? Why do you think they did this? How does Kaarlo react?
7. What is May Amelia's reaction when Baby Amy dies? Why do you think she reacts so strongly?
8. What did you think of the cover and the illustrations in the book? Did they add or take away from your enjoyment of the story?
9. Why do you think Papa is so gruff? Is he a good father? What challenges does he have by being May Amelia's dad?
10. At the end of the book, we learn from the Author's Note that this story is inspired by the author's grandaunt. Do you like it when authors include factual information after a fictional story?
11. This book is a Newbery Honor Award winner. What about this book do you think makes it excellent?

<http://www.multcolib.org/talk/guides-our.html>



Author Interview

I was a weird little kid.

Well, maybe not weird, but just very much into books. Specifically, Lloyd Alexander's **CHRONICLES OF PRYDAIN**.

Something about the high adventure of these books spoke to me as a girl with four brothers growing up in the small town of Audubon, Pennsylvania. I suppose you might say I considered myself as beleaguered as poor Taran and Eilonwy -- fighting my way through hordes of zombie-like creatures...er... I mean, boys, just to get to the bathroom.

I spent whole afternoons reading and re-reading **THE BOOK OF THREE**. In fact, the highlight of a particular summer vacation was not, for me, going on the water slide at the theme park, but rather stopping at a bookstore with a great kid's section and discovering -- gasp! -- that Mr. Alexander had written *four* more books about Taran and his friends. While my parents studiously drove us kids to the historic marvels of Williamsburg, I resolutely kept my nose in those books, knowing with absolute certainty that some guy cleaning a musket didn't hold a candle to Taran trying to wrest back the Black Cauldron. This predilection on my part may explain that while I never did very well on the American Revolution, I knew how to draw the entire map of the mythical kingdom of Prydain!

So, being the avid little fan, I wrote my favorite author a letter and sent him my very first manuscript (mind you, I still think **THE DRAGON WHO COULDN'T BREATHE FIRE** -- a story about a water-breathing firefighter dragon -- will someday have its place on the bestseller lists!). One day after school, I came dragging in to the kitchen, and my mom said, without looking up from the sink, "Some guy named Mr. Alexander is on the phone for you."

It turned out that Lloyd had called because I, clever little kid, had neglected to include a return address where he might send me a letter (but I had very helpfully enclosed a phone number). Naturally, I had a million questions for him, but all I could think to say was:

"I love your books!" I blurted, in my typical 12-year-old-Jenni style. Not exactly witty repartee.

Recently, while on tour for my new book, **BOSTON JANE**, I mentioned my childhood experience to Hannah Schwartz, the owner of the wonderful Children's Book World in Haverford, PA, explaining how I wished I'd said something more interesting to such a famous author, but that I had been

star struck.

She just laughed and said, "Oh, why don't we call him now?"

Naturally, I thought she was kidding, but she just picked up the phone, dialed, and said calmly, like it was something she did every day, "Lloyd, this is Hannah, and I have someone here who wants to say hi."

And then she handed me the phone. Here it was. The moment I'd been waiting for since my first book, **OUR ONLY MAY AMELIA**, was published. I was finally going to speak to my childhood idol and tell him that I felt he should have been on that stage with me when I accepted the Newbery Honor Award, because he had been the reason I'd kept writing. I opened my mouth to tell him all this, and instead the following came out:

"I love your books!" I blurted.

Does the word *dork* come to mind? Sigh. I guess some things never change. Perhaps, in the end, we're all just weird little kids who love to disappear into our heads once in a while and hang out with heroes and enchantresses, and even a few monsters. And it's authors everywhere who illuminate the path. Some books have lately swept me right back to childhood are Brian Selznick's hilariously touching **THE BOY OF A THOUSAND FACES**, Shana Corey's laugh-out-loud **FIRST GRADERS FROM MARS**, and most delightfully, **THE GAWGON AND THE BOY**, the newest book by the master himself...Lloyd Alexander!

So, go ahead, drop your favorite author a note. You never know...they just might call you back!

<http://www.booksense.com/people/archive/holmjennifer.jsp>



Further Reading

If you liked **OUR ONLY MAY AMELIA** by Jennifer L. Holm, you might like to read the following books, too!

- LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*** by Laura Ingalls Wilder
CADDIE WOODLAWN by Laura
THOMAS by Bonnie Pryor
THE BORNING ROOM by Paul Fleischman
PIONEER SISTERS by Melissa Peterson
AMBUSH IN THE WILDERNESS by Kris Hemphill
OREGON, SWEET OREGON Karr, Kathleen
HOME ON STONEY CREEK Luttrell, Wanda
TO THE FRONTIER Elizabeth Cody Kimmel
CHARLOTTE AVERY ON ISLE ROYALE by Rebecca S. Curtis
ORPHAN JOURNEY HOME by Liza Ketchum
BOYS HERE--GIRLS THERE by Riki Levinson
LILY'S CROSSING by Patricia Reilly Giff
A LONG WAY TO GO by Zibby Oneal
WHISTLER IN THE DARK by Ernst, Kathleen
THE CABIN FACED WEST by Jean Fritz
CHANGES FOR KIRSTEN: A WINTER STORY by Janet Beeler Shaw
DANGER ON THE TRACKS by Bill Freeman,
BOSTON JANE: AN ADVENTURE by Jennifer L. Holm
THE ROAD TO HOME by Mary Jane Auch
A YEAR WITHOUT RAIN by D. Anne Love