



STARLIGHT, STARBRIGHT

CELEBRATE THE MAGIC OF CHILDHOOD

BY SALLIE W. BOYLES | PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF PATRICIA
MCCANDLESS

“May the words on my tongue taste delicious!”

This illuminating quote from *Becoming Jesse: Celebrating the Magic of Childhood* is among many notes worth pocketing from this self-published, prize-winning novel. Written by first-time author Patricia McCandless, the tale unfolds through colorful characters, particularly six-year-old Jesse. In his quest to find his “disappeared” grandmother, the boy who “eats puzzles for breakfast” begins to discover himself and shine. “You are the stuff of stars” is McCandless’s prevailing message.

She wanted to give families an uplifting story in contrast to so much darkness in children’s literature. Her instincts were on point. Besides earning a 2020 Family Choice Award, a Mom’s Choice Award, and accolades from notables like Jack Canfield (coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*), McCandless hears praise from fans of all ages. Children as young as seven devour every word of her book, while adults feel the magic and cherish the journey back to simpler times.



Wading Heron II by Patricia McCandless, made from layered Japanese paper

The tale unfolds in early 1950s New York City. Lacking modern technology, Jesse's search takes time. "The lesson of patience versus instant gratification is an underlying reason why I wrote the book," says McCandless. She also gives a TEDx Talk about the critical need to control children's exposure to technology's addictive stimuli that can dull their minds and dim their internal lights.

"Magic lights go on when children are in the here and now," expresses the author, speaker, teacher, artist, vocalist, musician, and composer. Her expertise comes from teaching first and second graders for thirty years. She and her husband, Tom, also raised a son and daughter and now spend as much "up-close and personal" time as possible with their five "grands." Importantly, McCandless maintains a youthful mindset in her early seventies. "I was once a child, too," she affirms, "and I remember my light."

Associating key moments in her life with some remarkable play of light appearing before her eyes, she recalls giggling uncontrollably as a toddler upon pressing the button on a "bubbler" (a drinking fountain) and being mesmerized by the way the arc of water caught the sunlight. McCandless has a way of capturing everyday magic such as this. "I love words," she says, "and Jesse loves words." Spoonerisms (for example, Jesse saying "eyeball" rather than *bye, all*) and malapropisms (such as the boy interpreting *fortitude* as "fort dude") are second nature to her.

McCandless also has a history of spinning tales. “I am a child of seven in my family, so growing up we told stories all the time” she says confessing “I got a reputation for exaggerating” Raised on a small island in New England, she informs, “I lived quite an enchanted life.” Being separated from the mainland meant she and her siblings took a ferry to school and learned to be resourceful. For entertainment, they benefited from the abundant creativity and range of artistic talents that ran through the family.



Puce Koi

“My whole family would sing in the choir,” she says. “I would always be the one to harmonize.” She later joined an a cappella group at her alma mater, Rosemont College. Over the years, she picked up various instruments, including the ukulele, guitar, fife, and flute. However, McCandless did not think about writing until she was nudged toward it at age fifty.

“I had just lost my mom, so a friend gave me the gift of a writers workshop with Madeleine L’Engle,” she says. L’Engle is the late author of classics such as *Camilla* and *A Wrinkle in Time*. “I was teaching at the time and told my principal about it. I said, ‘I’m not going, of course. I’m not a writer.’” Turning to her cabinet, the principal pulled out a stash of cherished letters and cards that McCandless had written to her and to students’ parents over the years. She then pronounced, “You’re going.”

The workshop took place at a Benedictine monastery. Covered in a blanket of snow that echoed the quiet, the setting was conducive to McCandless mourning her mother, meditating, and writing. Best of all, she found L’Engle to be “deeply thoughtful and spontaneously funny. I was chosen to read aloud one of my first writings,” says McCandless. L’Engle told her, “I could listen to you read all day.”

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Shortly after, in 1996, McCandless began journaling. “I have a le cabinet full of my writings,” she says, “mostly stories from my childhood and about my mom.” Her collection also includes a manuscript for another novel. “My first book—about a young, ostracized girl—takes place all in one day,” she says, signaling that she will be revisiting it. As for *Becoming Jesse*, she informs, “I started it feebly in 2003.”

McCandless first wrote about Dearie, the devoted grandmother with whom orphaned Jesse lives. “Dearie is a little of my mom and her sisters, who were a huge influence on me.” Becoming immersed in the character, she says, “I had to know Dearie’s stories and her past that I call the Irish Travelers.” But after creating Jesse, she says, “He’s whispering in my ear, ‘This is *my* story. Let’s have fun with *my* story.’ I thought, there are plenty of books for girls about learning who you are at a young age, but not for boys.”

She also gave Jesse male influences. Her father, a navy man, imparted his love of the water and taught McCandless, among many things, to sail. Her first ukulele was a gift from an uncle. “I believe every person leaves an imprint upon us—life footprints on our hearts or tattoos on

our bones,” she says. Considering “the sparks of personalities, flickers of conversations, and flares of events that light up my memories,” she says, “I wanted older people in the story who were not related to Jesse to validate him.”

When it comes to validating herself, McCandless says, “In the last few years, I have been coming to terms with my gifts. People would give me a compliment, and I’d say, ‘Oh, really now.’ My husband and daughter have helped me accept the compliments—that I do have these gifts and to let them shine, so we all shine brighter.”



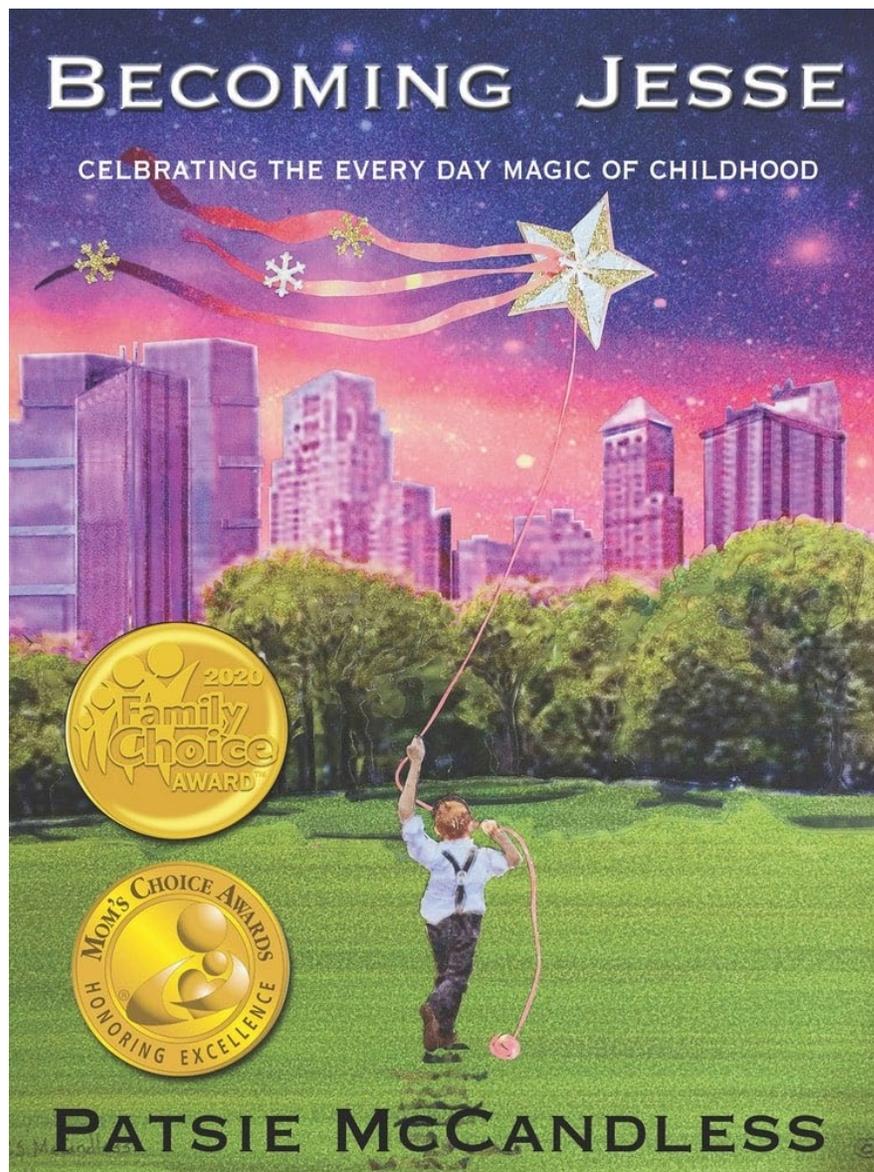
Author, artist, and speaker Patricia McCandless

Having exhibited her work in several galleries, the gifted artist created something special for the cover of *Becoming Jesse*. She says, “There’s a chapter in the book called ‘Sparklers’ that takes place in August when shooting stars can be seen, and I wrote an impression: ‘Slowly, like a beautiful lady the sky slid into her black velvet dress and showed off

her glittering necklace of stars.' I stopped and made a little sketch of Jesse holding a star, which is a kite in Central Park. I wanted Jesse to be connected to the starlight."

The work is a paper mosaic, not a painting. McCandless's signature process, named Paper Solo, begins with a pencil sketch on tissue and ensues with her meticulously cutting, layering, and gluing ne papers of various colors and textures. She arranged her extensive catalog of internationally sourced paper by color and stored it in at les and racks in her studio.

Often reflecting light and natural elements, her impressionistic compositions range from two-and-a-half by three inches to full scale. Requiring a week or more to complete any size, McCandless says, "A miniature can take just as long as a three-by-four-foot because the detail has to be so exacting. I can take a couple of hours just to choose my papers, and then I have to analyze my design. Some of my papers are so beautiful," she admits, "I have a real challenge cutting into them."



Becoming Jesse: Celebrating the Magic of Childhood is Patricia McCandless’s first novel. It received a 2020 Family Choice Award, a Mom’s Choice Award, and much praise from readers and critics alike.

Having taught herself to draw and paint, McCandless conceived Paper Solo by chance. She and Tom had both retired from teaching. They were visiting Savannah, Georgia, and the local beach community of Tybee Island was hosting a contest—an art project to beautify the plain-white water tower. Patricia submitted an eight-by-ten painting of two white birds and won. After the vacation, she decided to create a large version of her work. Serendipitously, she says, “My daughter, who worked at a

stationer's store, came home with gorgeous, handmade papers from Japan and Thailand." Thus, instead of a painting, McCandless made a three-by-five-foot paper mosaic.

More recently, she has been pairing her Paper Solo creations with her haiku poetry. She also publishes a weekly blog. Blending her affinities for words and music, she even has a collection of lullaby books in the works. Meanwhile, Jesse's fans can look forward to the rest of his story, which is not resolved in the first book. "I'm writing a sequel," McCandless reveals, "and I have a third book in mind. I would also love to do an audio recording. I'm a good reader, and I can do accents. Jesse has a little voice; Dearie has a silvery voice."

We look forward to hearing more from all of them and seeing how brightly McCandless's light continues to shine.

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To read more about Patricia McCandless, view her art, preview Becoming Jesse, listen to her TEDx Talk, or learn about her speaking availability and classes, visit her website, PSMcCandless.com (<https://psmccandless.com/>).

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