

# Traveling to Eldorado



When young readers select fiction for themselves—after *Harry Potter*—their choices begin with humor and run through genres including ghost stories, sports stories, science fiction, fantasy, and romance. Historical fiction is nudged out of last place by such spellbinders as *Jennifer and Amber Learn the Joys of Flossing*.

Historical fiction is an odd category that includes time travel, fantasy, and even bodice-rippers. It probably seems to some that writers of historical fiction gather cupfuls of history and sprinkle them through a story. As an author of juvenile historical fiction, I know better. Good historical fiction for young readers grows from particular times and places. Those of us who write historical fiction don't use history as a surface embellishment. Instead, we find ways to make history shape character and drive plot.



Fig. 1. Hearst Methodist Church, courtesy of Joann Mazzio, Pinos Altos, N.M.

I had all this in the back of my mind as I noodled around a cemetery near my home in Pinos Altos, New Mexico, a mining district that boomed from the 1870s through the 1890s. I noticed that men lured to these mountains by gold fever had the earliest headstones. Then came markers for women and children. Many children. This made me think that following the gold bug may have been exciting for men, but I suspected that for children such as Maggie McDonald (born 1876 and died 1887), a mining camp must have been hell. This spark of an idea lit my travel into the past and suggested the kind of historical information I would need to create the juvenile novel that became *Leaving Eldorado*.



Fig. 2. Main Street, courtesy of Joann Mazzio, Pinos Altos, N.M.

As I expanded my idea, I kept one eye on the story and another fixed on the

phalanx of adults standing between me and my readers. I needed to write a story that editors, librarians, teachers, parents, and grandmothers (bless them) would choose and then buy. Thinking of Maggie McDonald's tombstone, I decided that the best way to milk the dramatic conflicts inherent in a dreary, male-dominated, late-nineteenth-century mining camp was to cast my main character as a girl old enough to act in her own behalf. Kids will not voluntarily read books with a protagonist younger than they are. My heroine, Maude, would be unencumbered by parents and at fourteen would appeal to readers aged nine through fourteen. Though reviewers have deemed *Leaving Eldorado* "feminist," I did not consciously slant it toward girls. That said, I won't deny that I knew more girls than boys read fiction. Nor was I unaware that many recently successful historical novels had girls as protagonists.



Fig. 3. Headstone, courtesy of Joann Mazzio, Pinos Altos, N.M.

Even though I thought about practicalities such as marketing, my aim, first and foremost, was to write a good mining camp tale that would keep kids asking, What happened next? I also wanted to tell a story that *could* have happened. Young readers travel into the world of books with little or no luggage. They generally don't have prior knowledge of the times. Out of obligation to them, I wanted to be historically accurate. I would draw on the details of stamp mills running day and night, girls marrying at thirteen and fourteen, hogs scavenging in camps, woodcutters recklessly denuding mountains for fuel and forage, and fires racing through mining camps. To make my tale believable, I began to jigger history. What better way to get rid of a no-good father than to send him to the 1897 Klondike gold strike in the Yukon? For Maude to be fourteen in 1897, her date of birth would have to have been 1883. Was it probable that she could, through determination, have shaken the mud of a mining camp from her shoes, the dust of conventional attitudes from her eyes, and, literally, have left the mining camp that I came to call "Eldorado"? I found that a woman born in 1887—not too long after 1883—in equally gritty circumstances had done just that. Her name was Georgia O'Keefe. Maude, I decided, would be an artist, a girl set on recognizing and resisting the aesthetic and personal ugliness of her surroundings.



Fig. 4. Adobe house, courtesy of Joann Mazzio, Pinos Altos, N.M.

But how would Maude, mired in mining muck, know that it was possible for women to achieve publicly as artists at the end of the end of the nineteenth century? History again came to my aid. I learned that in Pinos Altos, Mrs. Phoebe Hearst (yes, from *that* family) used her leverage to insist the Methodists attach a reading room to their new church, or else she would withhold her donation. They accepted her stipulations along with her donation, but they refused to allow

women and children entrance to the reading room. I decided Maude would clean the church to gain access to this reading room. There I would have her find back issues of the *New York Times* heralding the 1895 exhibit in New York of American impressionist painter Mary Cassatt. Once Maude's mother was dead and her father Yukon-bound, she was on her own. She would find work in a boarding house, writing down her experiences in the form of letters to her dead mother. What I didn't hear from tombstones, rocks, museums, and local histories was Maude's voice. The Bible and Shakespeare furnished her flights of high-flown phrasing. For her kitchen voice, I dug deeper. I found that voice in taped oral histories and collections of pioneer women's writings compiled by historians.

Maude came to life for me, becoming a character I could not fully have imagined at that moment when I gazed at Maggie McDonald's tombstone in the Pinos Altos cemetery. She and her story are rooted in the circumstances and attitudes of a nineteenth-century mining camp. Maude is not and never was a twenty-first-century girl with a cupful of history sprinkled over her.

**Further Reading:** For more information about ranking juvenile fiction, see Jane Fitz-Randolph, *Writing for the Juvenile and Teenage Market* (New York, 1969); Joan Aiken, *The Way to Write for Children* (New York, 1982); and Amy Alessio, "A Librarian Looks at Trends in Teen Reading," *SCBWI Bulletin* (Nov.-Dec., 2000): 22-23. References useful in finding Maude's voice included Lillian Schlissel, et al., eds., *Far from Home: Families of the Westward Journey* (New York, 1989) and Hamilton Holt, ed., *The Life Stories of {Undistinguished} Americans as Told by Themselves* (New York, 1990).

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