

# Face Time: Author and former Rumford teacher Cynthia Fraser Graves

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By Marianne Hutchinson  
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Cynthia Fraser Graves is a writer who grew up in Rumford and later worked as a teacher at Mexico High School. Her most recent book is for children titled “Maude and the Merry Christmas Tree,” illustrated by Nancy Bariluk-Smith.

Graves’ “Maude” book is the first of a series with “Maude and the Holy Oak” to be published this spring. The books all feature Maude, an 8-year-old girl whose character and adventures are based on Graves’ own childhood growing up on Spruce Street in Rumford in what she describes as a wholesome world with “no technology or phones, and only the safe, natural world as a playground.”

**Name:** Cynthia Fraser Graves

**Residence:** West Kennebunk

**Job:** Writer and retired school teacher who taught in Rumford area schools.

**Your children’s stories about a child named Maude growing up in a small town are based on your own childhood growing up in Rumford.**

**You’ve said that you had a “great childhood” in Rumford. Why was your childhood so good in your view?** Life in Rumford, during the years I lived there with my parents on Spruce Street (1944 to 1962), was so simple and nourishing as I look back. The seasons came and went with great regularity, each bringing games that made up the content of our days. Hide-and-seek, rover, red rover . . . marbles, dodge ball, sliding in the winter, going to the pond in summer . . . we learned so much by playing and we played all day long and into the dark.

Neighborhoods were safe, open, interconnected places where the kids you played with became a second family. No one stayed in watching TV. . . . All the adults on the street watched over the children as they played, most mothers being at home. I remember walking home one night after dark with no worry at all about being in any way harmed. I had picked up the bad and secret habit of smoking, and thought I would have a last “butt”



Cynthia Fraser Graves Submitted  
*photo*

as we used to call them. I lit up and continued walking down a small hill not far from my home, ditching the cigarette as I got close. By the time I got to 42 Spruce St., my mother was standing on the porch and wanted to know just what I thought I was doing smoking. Someone had seen me and called my mother to inform her of this.

My years in Rumford were happy, simple, and safe. School was not the competitive, tense experience it seems today. Children had space and time to learn who they were and to follow their own unfoldment.

**“Maude and the Merry Christmas Tree” and the other five books in the series you plan came to you very quickly after completing a course on creativity.**

**Why and how did this course affect you in this way?** The course I spoke of was The Artist’s Way by Julia Cameron. If one takes this course seriously, one is in for transformation. The requirements are many and arduous, including a six-week practice of writing three pages, stream of consciousness style, every morning at first awakening for six weeks. That’s where this course begins, but there is certainly more involved. The objective of the practice is to somehow get around all the deadening mind chatter and beliefs that one acquires in living. Beneath this outer layer of thinking and obeying, Ali Baba’s cave of bright jewels, a deep secret residence of the inner artist, exists, present in all of us but largely untapped in this time of outer chaos and threat (because it is) often perceived as dangerous territory for its lack of respect of rules and dogma.

I took the time and effort to seriously apply myself to this practice. In week five or so, I woke up one morning to find that somehow, many, six, maybe seven experiences from my childhood had coalesced into great little stories with a main character already in place, Maude of Maine, named after an aunt who died early in my life, Aunt Maude. “Maude and The Merry Christmas Tree” is now published with many other books planned.

**One negative aspect of your childhood was that you felt that as a creative child you had to “hide out” and “learn to lay low.” Can you describe why you felt this way and if you think that things are better for creative children today?** It’s interesting that you use the word “negative” in your question, and I’m sure that I characterized my experience as a “creative” kid in a rule-driven environment, with anything out of the box considered dangerous, as “negative.” Breaking the rules in my school was a reason for corporeal punishment.

On reflection, I might now say that the need to keep the imaginative and mystical nature of my creative self under the surface led to my developing a sure, close, mystical relationship with nature and my own life as a gift. I always knew that what I saw was only the surface of what was possible and real. My imagination was a place I could actually go to get out of the dullness of the usual. Though my early years were spent learning the prescribed curriculum of the day, I was always aware of that precious, creative kinship that lived deep and secretly within. It survived and thrived in spite of the years of rote and repetition.

**You've created your own publishing business, the Androscoggin Press. What made you decide to do this and how are you planning to use it?** Androscoggin Press evolved organically as I became more and more disappointed in the outlook of most publishers that the book you are presenting is judged on the money it would bring. As the home page of our press declares, "We are a small press dedicated to supporting authors and artists whose work reflects the beauty, integrity, and uniqueness of the Maine way of life."

Those who have work they would like to publish under our moniker are free to be in touch and submit it for approval. We provide a portal for the publication, support from others in the press, and freedom. Marketing rests with the author, but, in most cases, publication of a work entails tireless months and years of getting the book out there. We are hoping to attend book fairs as soon as health risks are minimized.

**I've noticed that in your books, birds — such as crows and a "redbird" in "Maude" — run through your writing. Do birds have special significance to you?** I would say so, but that in itself is not unusual. My book "Never Count Crow: Love and loss in Kennebunk, Maine" uses an old crow rhyme within the story:

*One crow, sorrow. Two crows, joy. Three crows, a letter. Four crows, a boy. Five crows, silver. Six crows, gold. Seven crows, a story that must be told.*

My reference to crows here is that with their flitting and shifting, counting them is difficult to do and it might be better not to try. Using them as predictors of the future is futile . . . the future will arrive whether we will it or not. Also, crows are known for their intelligence and for being able to recognize individual human beings. While writing this book, there were clouds (should I say a murder) of crows in the backyard daily. They were an encouragement to me in scribing the rather sad subject of "Never Count Crow" . . . they even took to scolding me if I left my writing to take a walk. It was rather uncanny.

The "redbird" in "Maude and The Merry Christmas Tree" is also a sentient bird, taking part in this Christmas story. There will be many more birds in Maude's stories. Our next bird is a blue jay.

**"Never Count Crow: Love and loss in Kennebunk, Maine" is about a family's experience of sudden death, and "Dusk on Route 1" is a novel about a widow who becomes involved in a missing person mystery. Do you find that writing is therapeutic for you?** "Never Count Crow" was written 13 years after the events it traces, the sudden death of my husband, Eugene Graves, in 1994. Death arrives in each person's life sooner or later — the death of parents, of a child, of brothers or sisters. The death addressed in "Never Count Crow" came with inexplicable elements, miraculous happenings that convinced us we were not alone in this dark place.

This event in the life of our family was devastating in the loss and pain it brought. I wrote the book to record this event for our family, to preserve the memory for grandchildren who would someday want to know what happened.

“Dusk on Route 1” is a novel that attempts to show the exile and loneliness a person (in this case Pamela Iverson) can experience when living in unresolved grief, even as the story offers the way out for the main character (and) a way back to communication and closeness with others through the events of rescue. In the middle of a Christmas Eve blizzard, a woman is in danger of losing her life. The forces of community and caring reach to find her before it’s too late, and those who reach out are rescued as well.

Both books center on experiences I have lived. Writing them has been a deep and liberating experience, leaving me able to put the past away and to look to the future in terms of what is next for me as writer. Presently, I’m working on a yearlong correspondence I had with Henry David Thoreau in a blog on Tumblr; it will be titled “This Heart We Share: Letters from Henry,” and on a sequel, “Dusk On Route 1; Two.” All of my books are available on Amazon and on Ingram spark. In all of my books, Maine shines through as the beautiful place it is.

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