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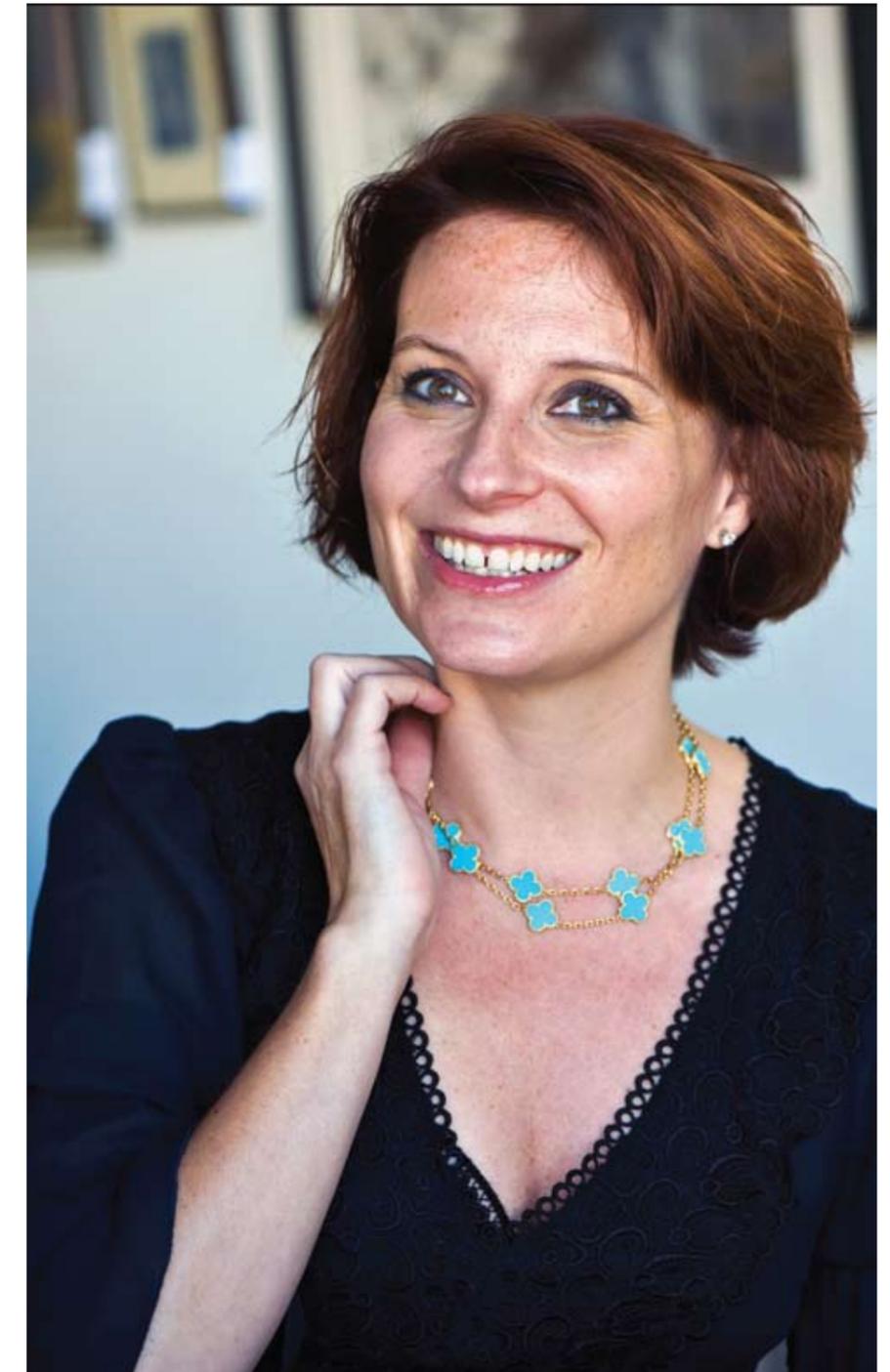


20 questions for Meg Cabot

Interview by Elisabeth Andrews Photography by Steve Raymer

Bloomington's Own Fairy-tale Princess

It's a classic Cinderella story: Lonely, small-town girl transforms into wildly successful international sensation. But there was no fairy godmother to wave her wand over Bloomington native Meggin Cabot. Although today she's easily recognizable as the celebrated author of more than 50 novels, including *The Princess Diaries*, the *Queen of Babble* series, and the *Heather Wells* mysteries, Cabot, a self-proclaimed "outsider," so feared rejection that she stockpiled nearly 20 years' worth of writing before she dared submit a manuscript. Once she worked up her courage, however—and endured the obligatory string of rejection letters—she quickly became one of today's most prolific sources of popular fiction for children, teens, and adults.



Cabot, 41, may be best known for *The Princess Diaries*, the bestseller that Walt Disney Pictures made into two hit movies starring Julie Andrews and Anne Hathaway. She is also the author of the 1-800-WHERE-R-YOU series, which was the basis for the television drama *Missing* that aired for three years on the Lifetime channel. Her Heather Wells mysteries, the first of which became a *USA Today* bestseller, have been optioned by ABC Family, and a movie based on her *Queen of Babble* series, set to star *Heroes* actress Kristen Bell, is under development by Sharp Independent films. Meanwhile, she continues to venture into new formats with a collection for young readers, *Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls*, as well as Japanese-style manga comics based on a number of her titles.

Cabot splits her time between New York City, Key West, and Ellettsville (yes, our Ellettsville!)—when she's not traveling to the more than 40 countries in which her books are sold. Recently, she was awarded a Distinguished Alumni Award from IU's College of Arts and Sciences.

BLOOM: You've written more than fifty books and continue to churn out several each year. Did this creativity start in childhood?

CABOT: Well, growing up in Bloomington back then, we didn't have cable. We only had three TV channels. We didn't have computers—I mean we didn't have a lot of the stuff kids have today. My friends would go on vacation during the summer or they would go to summer camp and I would be the only kid left in my neighborhood. My dad wasn't making a lot of money so we never went on vacation. I was stuck in my house with my Barbies. I actually value that upbringing because it forced me to use my imagination to make up my own games and a lot of the time I did end up writing my own stories.

BLOOM: Your latest series, *Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls*, is about a nine-year-old. Does it draw on your grade school days in Bloomington?

CABOT: Yeah, those are really autobiographical. They are really about me and when I went to Elm Heights Elementary School, which now is Harmony School. I actually went first to Childs School, but we moved from the Childs School area into town so my dad could walk to work. I was so mad at my parents when they forced me to go to this new school. I hated it at first, and that's the whole Allie Finkle story.

BLOOM: So many of the protagonists in your young adult novels are misfits in some way—outsiders who feel like they don't fit in. Do you think that was true of you as a teenager?

CABOT: Yeah, I was. Totally, totally. And I think that's true of all my books—really the theme that runs through them all is that as a teenager most people feel like freaks. I just take it to another level in my books where the girls actually are freaks. For instance, in *Princess Diaries* she really is a freak because she's a princess. And in the *Mediator* books where the girl can speak to ghosts, and then in 1-800-WHERE-R-YOU where she has psychic powers, they really are freaks.

BLOOM: Did you always plan on being a writer?

CABOT: I wanted to be a veterinarian for a very long time. But it turns out you have to know math to be a veterinarian and when I found that out, that really ruined that dream because I was never very good at math. So then I decided I would be an actress. Actually, all through high school I was going to be an actress, but I was still writing all the time, just for fun. Then I realized one day when I was up on stage that when you're acting, you're saying stuff that somebody else wrote. And I

really wanted to say stuff that I wrote. So then I thought, "Maybe I'll be a writer."

BLOOM: But when you went to IU, you chose not to study writing or literature.

CABOT: Yeah, I actually met this guy at a party who was a creative-writing and English major and I was talking to him about majoring in creative writing, and he was like, "Don't do it, it's horrible, all the professors will suck the love of writing out of you." And that really freaked me out so badly that I thought, "Well, I'm not going to do that because I love writing and I don't want that to happen." So I just took all sorts of classes. And the one that I really ended up loving was an illustration drawing class. So I started taking tons of classes at the art school, and I thought, "Well, I'll be an illustrator." So when I graduated, I went to New York to become an illustrator. But of course nobody was hiring at all. I got like two jobs.

BLOOM: The guy from the party, Benjamin D. Egnatze, resurfaced, didn't he?

CABOT: He was a friend of a friend and I ended up meeting him again when I got to New York, but I hated him. I thought he was a big jerk. His dad was a doctor, so he had this

red BMW and he had these Ray-Bans and I just thought he was some dumb frat guy. But he was just really nice to me. He got me my first job in New York. He worked in an investment bank and they had an opening for a receptionist position. So I saw him every day and he would buy me lunch. He turned out to be really funny and nice and sweet. And that's when we got together and now we're married. End of story.

BLOOM: You wound up working at a dorm at NYU, which was the basis for your Heather Wells murder-mystery series. What was that like?

CABOT: I was assistant dorm manager and it was a great job, I loved it. I worked there for ten years. It was great because in the mornings nothing ever happened because the kids were asleep, so I would work on my books. There were actually never any murders when I worked in the dorm. Sadly, there were some suicides and unfortunately that is a leading cause of death of kids that age.

BLOOM: So all that time you kept on writing for your own enjoyment. What finally convinced you to try to get your work published?



Cabot felt "totally" like a misfit as a teenager. Not looking so here, at age 16. Courtesy photo

CABOT: My husband was finally like, "You're always writing these books. Why don't you try and send them out?" And I was like, "No, because if they get rejected, I'll feel bad." Writing was really my hobby, and if somebody rejects your hobby then what have you got left?

But then my dad died, and I realized you don't really have a lot of time in life. And if there's something you want to do, you shouldn't put it off or be afraid to try. Because really that's the worst thing that can happen, that somebody you love dies. I realized that being rejected



Dressing the part for "50s Day" at Elm Heights Elementary, Meg Cabot in 6th grade. Courtesy photo

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Class of '85, graduating from Bloomington High School South. Courtesy photo

can't ever be as bad as that. So the day I got back home from the funeral here in Bloomington, I started sending stuff out. And it was all immediately rejected.

BLOOM: How long did it take to get an acceptance?

CABOT: For about three years I got rejections every day. It was really depressing but I kept thinking, "I've got nothing to lose," so I kept writing no matter what. And sometimes I would get really encouraging rejections. They'd be like, "This isn't really what we're looking for, but you're obviously a good writer so keep us posted if you write something that's not about a high-school basketball coach or not about a medieval romance or something set in a different time period."

So finally someone who rejected me—they didn't want something medieval but they were looking for a Victorian romance, and I had actually already written a Victorian. I said, "Well, I just happen to have a Victorian that I've written in my spare time." And I sent it in and they said, "Perfect!" and bingo!

It was fantastic! I ran out onto my balcony in my New York apartment and I burst out, "I'm getting published!" And everybody in the

complex was like, "Go away! We're all published! Who cares?" It was really funny!

BLOOM: Why did you choose to use a pen name, Patricia Cabot, on that first book?

CABOT: I didn't want to use my real name because it was such a smutty book and I didn't want the kids from the dorm or, like, my grandmother to find out about it. But of course they all did. And the kids from the dorm actually invented a drinking game based on my books. It was funny. It ended up being fine.

BLOOM: What inspired you to write *The Princess Diaries*?

CABOT: I just felt like when I was a teenager I couldn't find books that were funny and that I could identify with that didn't have "issues." We call them "issue" books in the young-adult field because there's always an issue like teen pregnancy or doing drugs or having an uncle molest you or, you know, the dog dies, all these horrible things. That was the problem, they all were "problem" books where the girls either ended up getting pregnant or they would end up on drugs and they'd learn this big lesson. I didn't really want to read books like that. I

wanted to read "escape" books that were fun. So when I started writing I decided to write the kind of books that I could never find.

BLOOM: Did you know immediately that *The Princess Diaries* would be a hit?

CABOT: I knew it was good, like I knew it was definitely different than anything else I'd seen. But it got rejected over and over again by a bunch of different publishers. My agent just kept sending it out. Actually, she was the one who sent it to Hollywood because she thought it would be a really good movie, but no one agreed with her. And then finally Whitney Houston, who had her own production company at that time, was the one who optioned it.

I thought it was a big joke until they finally started calling and said Garry Marshall [*Pretty Woman*, *Beaches*] is going to direct and Julie Andrews is going to star, and then I started thinking, "Wow, maybe this is real!" But they don't send the check until the filming actually starts, so it was quite some time before they actually sent the check and that's when I thought, "Yeah, I guess this is real," because I got this check with all these zeros. It was only like \$100,000, which I know sounds like a lot, but not considering how much money that movie made. It made something like \$700 million for it and the sequel together and I think I got like \$100,000 or maybe like \$200,000. Yeah, I know, it's sad and that's why the writers went on strike.

BLOOM: What did you think of the movie itself? It must have been strange that first time to see your story on screen.

CABOT: I liked it. It was cute. It was very cute. And the sequel was weird because it had nothing to do with anything in the books, like nothing that happened in it is ever going to happen. But the movies did a great job of capturing the spirit of the books and they got so many kids to go out and buy the books who ordinarily, I'm sure, would never have heard of them, so that was great. And I get so many e-mails from girls saying, "I'd never read a book before and then I saw this movie and now I can't stop reading."

Actually, I wanted to start writing books for younger girls because I had so many of them wanting to read *The Princess Diaries* because they'd seen the movie and the movie was rated "G," but the books are very much not G-rated. They're more of a "PG" or "PG-13" really, because there's French kissing. So I'd get these horrified parents who went out and bought the book after the kids saw the movie

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"That's when all the drama happens: fourth grade."

and gave them to a six-year-old, who would send these letters saying, "You are the ruin-ation of the entire second grade of my child's school because now they're all talking about French kissing." So I decided I'd write a book that was okay for seven-year-olds to read.

Now I really like writing for that age group. It's really fun. I didn't think it would be because there's no kissing and there's no prom or anything but it's actually really fun going back and thinking about fourth grade and all the drama. I mean, really, there are some fourth graders in my neighborhood where I live in Key West and, seriously, every time I see them someone's crying because there are some weird mind games going on. That's when all the drama happens: fourth grade.

BLOOM: I know you hear frequently from your young readers. How is the reaction to *Kristen Bell as the Queen of Babble*?

CABOT: Good, except sometimes they say, "But she's not fat enough," because the character is supposed to be rather large. And I'm like, "Oh my God, you guys, just calm down." It's still so far from being made right now. They're still trying to find a studio, so they've got plenty of time to fatten her up.

"We really want to live in the Indiana Memorial Union."

BLOOM: It seems like all your hard work has paid off in terms of your success in what was really your dream job. Do you have any gripes about the writing life?

CABOT: Yeah, I have tons! I hate revising, so I really like writing that first draft, and then when you turn it in and your editor sends it back with tons of notes—I hate that. Although, usually, unfortunately, they're right. And I don't like deadlines. I wish you could just turn it in whenever, and unfortunately that's a big part of it. And I hate that, unfortunately, the way it works is that you call your editor and say, "I have this great idea for a book. What do you think about this?" And she says, "Great! Turn it in by such-and-such a day," and then suddenly I hate the idea.

But really, how can I have gripes, because it's so great! I know there are so many people who've never gotten published. And I was one of those people for so long. I got rejected for so many years.

BLOOM: Back then, writing was what you did for fun. So now that you are writing for a living, what do you do to blow off steam?

CABOT: It's weird because when I have time off, I think, "Oh, it'd be really fun to write a book about this funny thing I thought about the other day," and I'll start writing it and then I realize, "Oh, my God, this is supposed to be my time off. What am I doing?"

So now I'm trying to be more laidback and enjoy other people's books and watch movies and go on bike rides and I've taken up snorkeling a little bit. And I come here and spend time with friends and stuff.

BLOOM: How much of your time do you spend in Ellettsville and Bloomington?

CABOT: We're here at least about six weeks of the year. My husband tries to go to all the IU basketball games because he's a huge Hoosier fan. I have a lot of friends here because a lot of the people I grew up with are still here. I love how the students are so energizing and there's always a lot of stuff going on, a lot of cultural events that you can attend. My husband is a chef so his favorite thing is to go to Bloomington

foods and the Farmers' Market. He's really into the Slow Food movement and organic stuff and buying fresh foods and meats and stuff from Fischer Farms.

BLOOM: Do you think there's a particular Hoosier influence on your writing?

CABOT: Oh, yeah, I think everybody when they're reviewing my books thinks *Sense and Sensibility* with the characters. I can't get away from it. All of my characters are always so decent and so kind. And I think, "God damn it!" But it's true, I can't get them to stop being so decent. I think that there really is a kind of wholesomeness, even when they live in New York. I think that has to do with having grown up here. Everyone in Bloomington just kind of looks out for each other and they're very concerned about the environment and concerned about one another and I don't want to say it's "Obama-esque," which is kind of a new term, but it really is. It really kind of epitomizes what I think he's going for as far as, "We all have to help each other out." I think that's really what Bloomington is about.

BLOOM: Do you think you'll always maintain a presence here?

CABOT: Yeah, it's so funny, my friends were like, "So you're going to retire here, right?" We were talking about what we really want to do: We really want to live in the Indiana Memorial Union. "How can we get condos in the Union?" We could go to a movie and we could eat at Sugar and Spice and spend time in the Commons. It would be just awesome to live there. Go bowling, as old people. We'd have to do a little bit of work on the rooms. We need a Jacuzzi tub in the room.

BLOOM: Will you know you're done when you've written something in every literary genre? Already you've covered most of them: adult fiction, chick lit, romance, detective mysteries, graphic novels, children's fiction, paranormal. What else are you planning to do?

CABOT: Maybe a memoir someday, but I think the danger is that once you've told your whole story there's nothing left to put in your books for fiction. Because each one of the books has a little grain of something that really did happen to me. So I don't think I'll ever do that. Maybe when I'm really old and retired and living in the Union. ✨



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