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It's All Story

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My Irish grandmother's house is still there in County Longford. Thatched and whitewashed long ago, it stands empty and forlorn now. But my ancient cousin, Mary, tells me stories about that four-hundred-year-old house and the fertile fields that surround it, almost as if my people still lived there.

"Fire glowed in that hearth for centuries," she says, "sometimes with just one ember to keep it going. At night, the family crouched there, listening to the wail of the *sidhe* outside."

Mary and I walk down the road to Ballinamuck. "Right here, there was a terrible battle." She waves her arm over the field. "Five hundred of our own died to the English that day."

She shakes her head mournfully. "The Americans had just won their freedom. Why not us? Why not?"

I spend time in the gray stone church searching through the baptismal books for my grandmother's name. Strangely, I can't find hers, but I find those of her brothers and sisters, nine of them, Margaret, Thomas, John, and the others. On the right side of each page, there's a column labeled "present at the birth." And for each there's a neat X and, in parentheses, "her mark."

Who drew those careful Xs, I wonder. My great-grandmother's mother? One of her sisters? I'll never know.

They couldn't read or write; I do know that. Not newspapers, not signs on the road, not a word in a book.

I was four when I learned to read. I sat with my father in the chair in the living room, while he read

from my grandmother's books: *The Song of Hiawatha*, *Evangeline*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I listened to his beautiful voice, happy to be with him in the warmth of that chair, captured by the stories that emerged from those silky pages.

In the kitchen on winter afternoons, my head rested on top of the small white radio under the window. I felt the vibrations as the stories came through, a new one every fifteen minutes. The characters and their problems were entirely real: *Just Plain Bill*, *Lorenzo Jones*, *Ma Perkins*, and ah, the long-suffering Portia who faced life while her husband Walter was far away in a Nazi prison camp.

And sometime during those years, I learned to put the wavering lines and circles together that became letters, that became words. And then I was writing, telling improbable tales of princesses in castles and

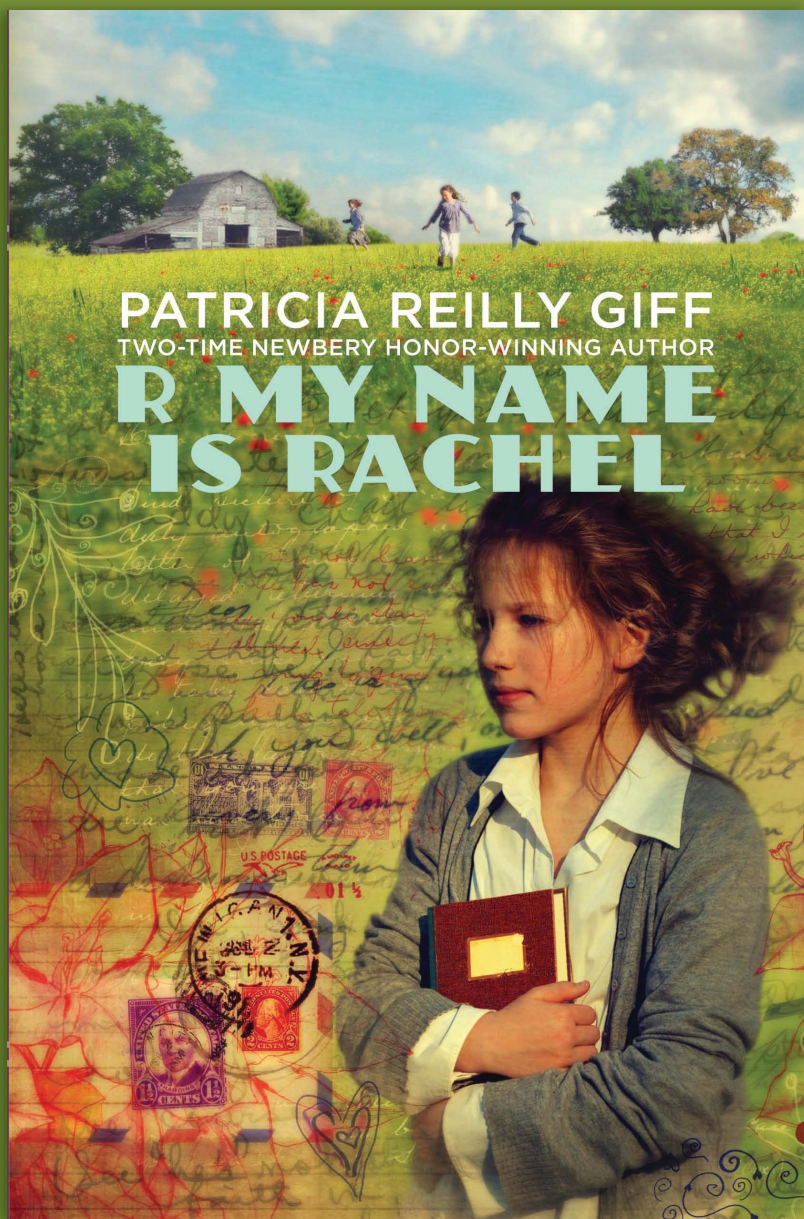
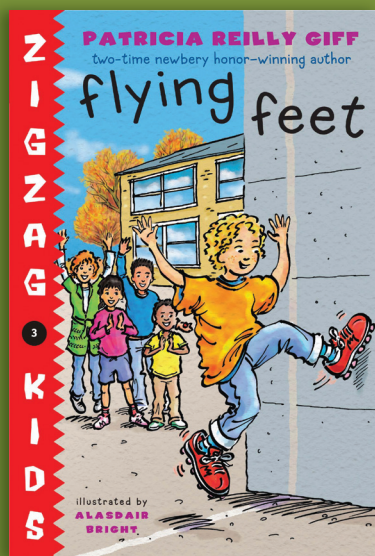
animals that spoke. I was in love with those stories. I felt the power of clothing my characters, of putting words into their mouths.

It was no surprise that I became a reading teacher, working with kids who couldn't read, some of them eleven and twelve years old. Most of them hated school; they wanted no part of phonics, or decoding, or of books themselves. But if I leaned forward, lowering my voice, I could entice them into listening to a story—any story—as long as I could make those characters come alive.

It was much later, after my first books were published, that I began to tuck in family stories, not only the Irish stories from Longford, but the ones my Nana told about my German great-grandmother's arrival in this country and her shocking realizations that there were no diamonds in the streets of Brooklyn, that she'd never see her mother again. I wrote about my own childhood, the fears associated with growing up during the Second World War.

My latest book *R My Name Is Rachel* is a story about the Great Depression because I'd heard about it often enough; I saw my mother turning out lights as she left a room, never turning on the oven unless it was for more than one dish. She'd sit at the table with me, telling stories about the disruption in people's lives, a time that she remembered before I was born.

I gathered books together in my growing library: books that were memories from my childhood, my children's books, dog-eared and sometimes crayoned over, books that I loved and wanted my grandchildren to read and love, too. The feel of the paper was sensuous under my fingers, the dust jackets vibrant, the gilded edges of my



grandmother's books beautiful. Books fill the shelves now; they're stacked on tables and some, I admit, cascade from piles onto the floor.

But so much changes in life. From the stories passed down by my cousin in Longford, from the ones told by my mother and Nana, from the radio stories and the television specials, from the books on my shelves, there's a progression. Now on my desk there's a slim e-reader. I have one of the first—antiseptic, gray with black letters on the screen. With a touch of my finger, I turn the page.

Change brings anxiety. What will happen to the books I love to hold in my hands, to the ones I read to my children and grandchildren? I can't imagine that there won't be a place for them.

But isn't it story that really counts? Shouldn't the method of delivery be a secondary consideration? Does

it make a difference if I stand arm in arm with a cousin who passes down a story about a four-hundred-year-old house, or a battle that dealt destruction two hundred years ago, rather than reading about it in a book? And wasn't the radio warm as I dreamt over the lives and problems of Ma Perkins or Portia Blake?

What is story anyway, if not an emotional attachment between giver and receiver? Certainly as I write, I never think of the delivery of my story. I'm obsessed with problems, with joys and sorrows, with the growth of characters as I search for resolution in their lives. What I want to be—need to be—is the teller of tales.

I have to hope that books will always exist; I can't imagine that they won't. But e-books are the beginning of an era, a new way to provide story. "Welcome," I say, or as my granddaughter might put it, "Bring it on!"

PATRICIA REILLY GIFF is the author of many beloved books for children, including the *Kids of the Polk Street School* books, the *Friends and Amigos* books, and the *Polka Dot Private Eye* books. Several of her novels for older readers have been chosen as ALA-ALSC Notable Books and ALA-YALSA Best Books for Young Adults. They include *The Gift of the Pirate Queen*; *All the Way Home*; *Water Street*; *Nory Ryan's Song*, a Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Golden Kite Honor Book for Fiction; and the Newbery Honor Books *Lily's Crossing* and *Pictures of Hollis Woods*. *Lily's Crossing* was also chosen as a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book. Her most recent books are *Number One Kid*, *Big Whopper*, *Flying Feet*, *Eleven*, *Wild Girl*, and *Storyteller*.

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