

Interview with Beverly Patt
Author of *Best Friends Forever: A WW II Scrapbook*

We know this is the typical question for authors but really, we have to ask: where did you get the idea to write BEST FRIENDS FOREVER?

Well, from two places, actually. When I was very young, I'd ask my mother to tell me stories from her childhood in California and she once told me of a family she knew who, one day, just disappeared. She probably told me more but all my six-year-old brain remembered was this delicious mystery about a family being there one minute, and gone the next. Many years later, I heard an interview on NPR of a musician who was asked how his band got started. He replied that the members were all living in the same Japanese Internment camp and started playing together to pass the time. When I heard that, I remembered my mother's story and realized the family she spoke of didn't disappear, they went to a Japanese Internment camp! Having never learned about this part of our nation's history in my own school experience, I became committed to spreading the word to this generation.

Did this family have a girl your mother's age? Is this their story?

No, the family only had boys but I did use my Mom as kind of a 'model' for Louise. Unfortunately, by the time I started this story, Mom had Alzheimer's and was unable to tell me any more about these friends and this experience. So I used her childhood diary and photo album (the kind with black paper pages and white colored-pencil captions!) to capture a bit of her childhood 'voice.'

For Dottie, I was lucky enough to interview (many times over) my friend's aunt and uncle, Margaret and Dave Masuoka, who had lived in one of the internment camps, Camp Jerome. The picture on the cover is of Margaret. This photo and one other are the only pre-WWII pictures she owns. The rest her family burned to show their allegiance to America.

In addition to Margaret's experiences, I studied real letters that children in the camps wrote to their teachers back home. The pluckiness and spirit of these children amazed me and further helped to form Dottie's indomitable character.

What about the character Marion? Was she based on someone you knew?

I think every girl - past, present or future - runs across a few Marions in their day. The trick is learning how to disarm these girls and not allow them to ruin your other friendships. The woman who graciously allowed us to use her childhood photo for Marion, however, is about as far from a "Marion" as she could be, and a good sport on top of it!

Were you always interested in history, even as a child?

I'll tell you a secret: I never was interested in history! My worst grades were in social studies and english. That said, I think the way history is taught and delivered makes all the difference in the world. In my day (oh, boy, now I sound like my grandma), social studies was just a bunch of map-coloring and date-memorizing - very dry. But now I see what my children are doing in their social studies classes and I'm so jealous! Lots of hands-on activities, play-acting, even taking on the identities of real Mayflower passengers - now THAT's the way to teach history! I also took a required U.S. History class to get my teaching certificate and I was ready for it to be a real snoozer. However, the instructor took one aspect of history - say, religion - and followed it from the Pilgrim days right up into the present. I loved that class and learned so much. It's all in the presentation. I am hoping that the presentation of BEST FRIENDS FOREVER with it's scrapbook format will make this piece of history come alive for students as well.

Did you have the scrapbook format in mind from the beginning?

No, it was a long and circuitous route. (Little-known fact: very few books come out of a writer's mind fully formed! There's usually a good deal of trial and error.) Originally, my manuscript consisted only of Dottie's letters, a format modeled after the lovely picture book, [The Gardener](#) (by Sarah Stewart, illustrated by David Small). A writing coach and friend, Esther Hershenhorn, gave me the idea to add 1940's memorabilia and factual sidebars, in the style of [Snowflake Bentley](#) (Jacqueline Briggs Martin). An interested editor at Darby Creek Publishing, Tanya Dean, suggested developing Louise's story more fully, which is what finally pushed me over into scrapbook territory. And then my writer's group gave insightful feedback on each new version, sparking even more ideas! Many writers will tell you (if they're honest, that is;) that sometimes it takes a village to write a book. You can see that was very true in the case of Best Friends Forever.

What was the biggest challenge in writing Best Friends Forever?

Actually, the writing was the easy part - it was the revising than was a challenge! The timeline was a particular bugaboo for me. For example, the dates of Dottie's letters had to be before the dates of Louise's entries. We had to be sure that if Dottie or Louise said they went to school, the date had to be a weekday in 1942 and not a Saturday or Sunday. Then there were dates of actual events and holidays to keep track of and how those played into the story. Rearranging the order of a few of Dottie's letters and Louise's entries further addled my brain, especially if they mentioned something that happened 'last week' or in a previous letter or entry. One little change caused a chain reaction of other changes that had to be made! Fortunately, my editor, Robin Benjamin, was amazing at keeping track of absolutely every detail and at spotting inconsistencies.

Her brain has this fine-toothed-comb attachment that catches everything. I am so lucky to have had her help.

You mentioned in your author's note that some of the things in BFF were based on real events. Can you tell us about the trays of fake eyeballs?

Absolutely! One of the unexpected joys of writing this story came from interviewing family and friends who were alive during WWII and learning so many interesting facts and personal stories. This particular one came from an interview with my Mom's best childhood friend, Vaux. Vaux's father was a dentist and part of his job was to go to a local Facial Rehab hospital to fix the injured soldiers. Vaux went with him one day and saw just what Louise described - she peeked through a doorway and saw tray upon tray of fake eyeballs - a tray of brown, a tray of blue, green, etc. I couldn't get that image out of my mind and knew I'd have to fit that in somehow.

Did you draw any of the illustrations?

I wish I was that talented! No, Shula Klinger was the illustrator and she did such a great job. Unlike most authors, I was lucky enough to see the first, second, tenth drafts of every sketch and painting Shula created and was asked for my input, to boot! It was a wonderful experience and I am grateful for Shula's talent and patience. Kristin Branch was the designer - every letter, label, paw print, newspaper article and page of the book was written by me but put together by Kristin. The way she made everything look so authentic is nothing short of amazing.

Having learned so much about this era, would you have liked to experience it?

There are a few qualities of the 1940s I wish we had today. People lived more simply, more within their means. They worked hard and appreciated the small luxuries they could afford. Families spent more time together, working, listening to the radio, going to church. Don't get me wrong - I love my modern conveniences - computers, cell phones, and that flip-down dvd player that entertains me while I cook! But I do think, our generation as a whole races around too much. We don't always take the time to be quiet, to listen, to create.

On the other hand, I'm proud of the incredible advances we've made as a country - just the sophistication of computers from when I first started writing boggles my imagination! The tolerance for other cultures and other religions is so much stronger and widespread as well. Seeing 1940s newspaper headlines and government posters with the word "Jap" in them shocked my 2009 self. Can you imagine a similar racial slur in our headlines today? It's unthinkable! We definitely have room for improvement but there's no arguing we have come a long way.

What do you hope your readers will ‘take away’ from reading BEST FRIENDS FOREVER: A WWII Scrapbook?

An appreciation for the past. An appreciation for the present. And an appreciation for the diverse population that makes up our world. It's my hope that if they find themselves making a snap judgement about someone based on outside appearances, they'll remember this story, and keep an open mind instead.