

Author and Artist Share a Love of Mules with Jasper: The Story of a Mule
By Helen T. Hertz

When author and mule expert Meredith Hodges asked Tennessee Mule Artist Bonnie Shields to do the illustrations for her first children's book, Jasper: The Story of a Mule, she knew exactly the type of mule she was looking for.

"First off, Jasper had to be a colt. Secondly, I wanted him to be common—a little bay mule who's nothing out of the ordinary on the outside but extraordinary on the inside," Meredith says.

It's no surprise that Meredith had a clear vision of the character she wanted to create. After all she's been working with mules and donkeys at her ranch in Loveland, Colo., for more than 25 years. Recognized internationally for her expertise, Meredith has been instrumental in the effort to take longears to new levels of performance and improve their standing in the equine world. Mule and donkey enthusiasts worldwide have turned to her books and videos for the keys to understanding their animals, and Meredith's popular series of mule-training television programs currently airs on RFD-TV.

Meredith has always been self-directed, if not downright stubborn in her focus, but it was her father, "Peanuts" cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, who first urged her to write a children's book. The story of "Jasper" began with a letter Meredith wrote to herself from a young mule colt abused and confused by his human owners. In time she saw the potential to deliver a broader message of love and compassion and expanded the piece into a book. The story follows young Jasper as he is taken from his mother and his close friends, Kylie and Moxie, to a new home where he must find his place among strangers. He struggles at first, despite efforts to please his new master, but the little colt perseveres and ultimately discovers the power of kindness and friendship.

Meredith's good friend Bonnie Shields was an easy choice to illustrate the book. The two women met about 20 years ago at the Mule Days Celebration in Bishop, Calif., where Meredith became an instant fan of Bonnie's art. Over the years Bonnie has provided illustrations for Meredith's training books and videos, and Meredith has continued to add Bonnie's art to her own growing collection of longears-inspired works.

"Bonnie captures the soul of the mule," Meredith says. "Like someone who paints portraits, she looks inside and sees who they really are."

Like Meredith, Bonnie was a horsewoman early on. Her career as an artist began at age four with a sketch in black and green crayon on Grandma's wall. Like so many young girls, she drew countless pictures of horses growing up. Then she discovered mules.

"I used to watch the mule pulls at the county fair," she says. "I could see they weren't just long-eared horses. They had a different kind of body and they used it differently. They also had what seemed to me a real intelligence and personality."

Bonnie honed her skills at the Ringling School of Art in Sarasota, Fla., founded by the famous circus owner. As she gravitated toward work with mules, both on paper and in sculpture, she was pleasantly surprised to find that plenty of other folks were smitten with them, too. Her reputation grew, and today she's as busy as she cares to be, with a successful web site and greeting card business and regular artistic contributions to Cowboy Magazine and other publications. She has illustrated several books, including

the last written by Misty of Chincoteague author Marguerite Henry, and she regularly offers her services pro bono to nonprofit mule organizations.

Bonnie was thrilled when Meredith asked for help with Jasper: The Story of a Mule. She drew about 275 pictures for book, and Meredith could bring herself to part with only 30 or so, making for a hefty 236-page story.

“This book is meant to stand the test of time,” Meredith says. “I see it as something kids will read again and again—a book that will be passed down to future generations.”

The story’s narrative is rich with positive messages for children, while a healthy dollop of excitement and humor makes for a fun read. Because both author and artist understand mules so well, they create a powerful sense of empathy—we really understand how this sensitive, curious and sometimes frightened little mule must feel, and we root for his success.

The project was a new kind of collaboration for the women, but Bonnie is accustomed to Meredith’s adventurous style. Meredith pushed Bonnie out of her rural comfort zone once again with an ambitious effort to turn Jasper’s story into a 2-D animated video. Produced by MediaTech Productions in Fort Collins, Colo., the video features an amazing array of talent. Long-time “Peanuts” animator Bill Melendez worked with Bonnie’s storyboards to bring Jasper to life. Actor Lee Horsley narrates the story, and the musical score is by Grammy-winning cowboy band Riders in the Sky and newcomer Mindy Ellis. The half-hour program, “Jasper: The Story of a Mule,” will air on RFD-TV through July (check program schedule), and DVDs will be available for purchase this summer.

With so much talent behind her, Meredith is committed to continuing Jasper’s journey. She recently published the second book in the series, Jasper: A Christmas Caper, and more holiday-themed books are planned, including Jasper: A Precious Valentine, due out before Christmas, and Jasper: A Fabulous Fourth, coming in Spring 2006. Of course all will feature Bonnie’s charming art.

For more information about Meredith and “Jasper,” visit www.jasperthemule.com, www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-816-7566. For more information about Bonnie Shields visit www.bonnieshields.com.