

## Being Mama: Author Annie Barrows

Meet Annie Barrows, mama of Clio and Esme, and author of an array of internationally acclaimed kids' and grown-up books including *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, *The Truth According To Us*, *The Magic Half*, *The Best of Iggy*, and the *Ivy & Bean* series, soon to come to life on Netflix.



**Elisse Gabriel**  
Senior Writer & Editor

For bestselling author Annie Barrows, "Being a mother is more courageous and so much harder than writing or working or being a good partner. It's harder than everything else I've ever done by about twenty times... On the other hand, when it's good it's never been so good. We're a family now, and that's really good."

Annie shared her observations about motherhood in Laurie Wagner's *Expectations: 30 Women Talk About Being A Mother*, shortly after giving birth to her first daughter, Clio. Both Clio and her younger sister Esme are now in their early twenties, but Annie continues to explore childhood while writing her bestselling book series, including *Ivy & Bean*, *Iggy* and *The Magic Half*.

You obviously loved books from a young age. What were some of your favorites as a kid?

I loved the *Betsy-Tacy* series, *Little Women*, the *Little House On The Prairie* series. So, obviously, what we're talking about here are stories about girls living their lives. But I also had a huge affection for books where magic happened. I would say my greatest reading experiences were Edward Eager's books like *Half Magic* and *Magic By The Lake*.

My favorite book of all time was *Time At The Top*. It was very obscure even then. It's about a girl who goes up in an elevator in her apartment building and goes back in time. I love that stuff.

What storybook characters still resonate or linger in your mind?

All of them! They felt more real than most people I knew.

Did you write stories as a child or make up characters?

No. I would just have a relationship with other people's fictional characters.

How did you land in publishing after majoring in medieval history in college?

Medieval history was actually my third major. When I started out, it seemed obvious that I should be an English major. I had loved English classes and went to UC Santa Barbara thinking I would become an English scholar. I passed out of English 1A and 1B, so the first class I took was Renaissance Poetry. We started out by reading Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and I thought to myself, *I hate this*.

Then I found art history and that was fantastic. I decided I wanted to be an art conservator. Since that was my goal, I transferred to UC Berkeley. They had a conservation lab there. Then I realized how much chemistry I would need to know. That was bad. At that point the classes I was most interested in were medieval history classes.

So I came out with a degree in medieval religious history. There were no jobs that actually come from

having that degree. The only thing I wanted to do, the only thing I knew anything about, was books.

Can you tell us more about your formative years as an editor and writer and how becoming a mother influenced your professional trajectory?

The very first job I had out of college was at an art magazine. I was the person who answered the phones. Then I became the subscription manager and after that the editor there and later worked as an editor for a special ed textbook company. I took any job I could get to learn more about it.

I learned how to do freelance copy editing and proofreading, and eventually accrued enough experience so that when a job came open at Chronicle Books I applied to be editorial assistant. That was during the Wild West adolescence of Chronicle. They were going through this immense growth spurt, and I just grew right along with them. So I started out as an editorial assistant, then became Assistant Editor, then Managing Editor, then Senior Editor. In a typical publishing company if you're an editorial assistant you Xerox stuff, answer phone calls, and write rejection letters; you don't acquire books. But I did; I became an acquiring editor even while I was really just an editorial assistant.

During that time I acquired a book that became their first *New York Times* bestseller, *Griffin & Sabine*. Then because I had done that, they kind of moved me up and said, "Great! Acquire some more stuff!" So that propelled me forward. The role got bigger and bigger and bigger until I was working 12 hours a day. Just as I was about to lose my mind, I started working part-time and went back to school to get my MFA.

Then, as I finished the MFA program, I had Clio. So the idea was I would work part-time as an editor at Chronicle and I'd stay at home the other half with my baby and write my first book for them. And of course she would be sleeping because she was only a baby. Soon I discovered that babies don't actually sleep at all. Writing the book (*The Book of Divination*) took three times as long as I said it would.

I was still working part time as an editor, but there came a point when I had this fantastic book that I had just acquired and got to travel to New York to pick out the photos for the book. And there I was in New York picking out amazing art for this amazing book, and all I wanted to do was go home and see Clio. And I thought, "This is as good as it gets. And I would be happy to stop tomorrow." So I stopped working as an editor and continued to write books part-time and be a mom the other part.



Annie with her daughters Clio and Esme

You've had remarkable success as an author of books for both adults and children. How does your approach to writing these different genres differ other than reading level?

It's totally different. First of all, the impetus to write kids' books came directly out of my daughters' experiences. So it never occurred to me to write for children despite the fact that I loved kids' books so much as a reader. When Clio was four, I realized I didn't want to write for grownups anymore. I just loved, loved kids' books. And I talked about them constantly. So that was when the switch came.

The essential difference with kids' books is that you're not writing for yourself. You're writing for somebody you are not. To me, the major shift is one of humility in the face of this truth. When you're writing for an adult, you can write for and to yourself, making whatever you want to read.

That's not your job when you're writing for kids. You are not allowed to think, "What do I want?" What you must think about is what will be satisfying to the reader of this book. Yeah, I want to laugh while I'm writing. I want to be happy while I'm writing. But I am not writing for myself.

Who inspired your array of children's characters?

Ivy and Bean really came out of the girls' experiences, but not specifically in terms of the characters. I mean, although Clio had red curly hair and wore a sparkly headband and always wore dresses, she's not Ivy. And although Esme was completely crazy all the time, she's not Bean. The characters are drawn from a lot of different sources.

Everything starts with a nodule of reality. Even Iggy, who is very clearly in my mind a composite of my husband Jeffrey and my friend Michael, is not 100% them. It is true that many of the things that happen to Iggy actually did happen to Jeffrey.

The one exception to the reality basis of my books was *The Magic Half*. It was a very sad day when I finally gave up on magic ever happening to me. It was very late in life, too. I was about 42 and I just thought, you know what? It's not gonna happen. I'm not going to go back in time. So I wrote a book about everything I had ever wanted in my life: going back in time, being a twin...all my unfulfilled desires. But even here, Clio was helpful. I wrote the first 40 pages and then left them sitting on a stool. She picked them up and started reading them and said, "Where's the rest?" And I said, "Oh. I haven't written it yet. I don't know if I have time to write it." And she was outraged. She really wanted to know what was going to happen, so I finished it.

When Clio was an infant, you were photographed with her while editing at your desk. Tell me more about this image and how you ended up being part of a book you'd acquired.

I'd acquired this book (*Expectations: 30 Women Talk About Becoming A Mother*). The photographer [Anne Hamersky] said, "I see that you have a little pregnancy thing going there. How about I come over as soon as you have the baby and photograph you?" I think I got the prize for the youngest mom photographed.

Your daughter Esme seems to have had a particular influence on your book *Nothing*. Can you tell me more about your collaboration with her?

Esme believes she is the author of that book. *Nothing* came out of reading YA books and then living among this pack of 15-year-old girls whose lives were about as dramatic as a rock. All the YA books I was reading were so dark and romantic with their addictions, their alien babies...whatever it was, it was full of action. And then these girls in my house were doing absolutely nothing, except sitting around my kitchen eating.

I would write during the day and Esme would come home from school, read the manuscript, and tell me all the things I'd gotten wrong; then she'd tell me how to make it more authentic. It was so much fun.

*Ivy & Bean* will soon be available for viewing as a Netflix series. How does it feel to see the characters you invented coming to life on the screen?

I think that the more you can view a movie based on your work as a separate work of art, the happier you will be in the long run. They don't need to make a movie that's faithful to my books. They need to make a movie that's a good movie. And I think they have.

What's amazing is that you dreamt up characters that are now in the minds and imaginations of so many kids. And now they're coming to the screen.

That is actually pretty amazing when I think about it like that. There was a point this past summer where I was thinking that *Ivy & Bean* started out as a book that was going to be between me and Clio, and now hundreds of people are currently employed because of that idea. I don't mean to say that I'm some kind of Lady Bountiful, but it is something that began in my head. I felt the same way when I was on the set of *Guernsey*, thinking that it all started in [my aunt and co-author] Mary Ann's head. From her idea to a teeming set and then an audience of—what?—millions, I guess. It's amazing.

It's the power of the imagination.

Yes, that germ of an idea has spread to all these people who now believe that Ivy and Bean are really something, you know?

See, that's magic.

There you go. But I still want to go back in time.

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