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Q&A with Mary Quattlebaum, author of *Jackson Jones and the Curse of the Outlaw Rose* (Delacorte/Random House/November 2006)

Reviews and Awards

Jackson Jones and the Curse of the Outlaw Rose

“A well-written, fast-paced adventure for early chapter book readers. Engaging characters, a unique mystery.”

--*School Library Journal*

Jackson Jones and the Puddle of Thorns

Winner of the Marguerite de Angeli Prize and a *Parenting Reading Magic Award*

Jackson Jones and Mission Greentop

Notable Social Sciences Trade Book

Q: *Jackson Jones and the Curse of the Outlaw Rose* is the third book about a boy and his adventures in a city community garden. Are kids really so drawn to gardening? And why is this third book a mystery?

A: Kids love dirt, water, digging, and poking things in holes. Gardening combines all of these! And it gives kids a hands-on way of connecting with the natural world. They can watch seeds grow, harvest and eat the fruits of their labor, and get grubby with all sorts of worms, pill bugs, and cool creepy crawlies.

Why a mystery? With *Outlaw Rose*, I wanted to play with the conventions of the ghost story. Rather than an old house, this ghost haunts an antique rosebush. Because this ghost doesn't moan and rattle chains in stereotypical fashion, Jackson is slow to realize that he is, indeed, dealing with a ghost, which hopefully makes for some funny moments in the book.

Q: These days, do urban (and suburban) kids have much experience with the natural world? And does it matter?

A: Certainly the media—and books such as Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books)—have highlighted what many perceive to be a national trend: Increasing numbers of youngsters with ever fewer firsthand experiences of the natural world. Because of busy after-school schedules and very protective parents, children seem to spend less time exploring the outdoors or just hanging out in their backyards than previous generations. There is concern that this disconnect from Nature may translate into less responsible future stewardship of the Earth. Who knows? But at the moment, kids are missing out on regular self-directed contact with the natural world. This is a big loss! Giving kids a chance to participate in school, community, or home gardens or in backyard wildlife habitats keeps them in touch (literally) with the wonders of the natural world.

Q: How have your own gardening experiences influenced the Jackson Jones books?

A: Like Jackson, I'm more of a curious than an expert gardener. Growing up in the country, I helped out with my family's large vegetable and flower gardens and certainly, as a kid, did my share of whining about weeding. But

when I moved as a young adult to an apartment in Washington, D.C., I missed grubbing in the dirt and signed up for a plot at a nearby community garden, which had begun as a Victory Garden during World War II. Being part of this community garden for years inspired all three Jackson Jones books. Now as homeowners in the city, my family and I have shaped part of our small backyard into a wildlife garden for native birds and beneficial insects, following the National Wildlife Federation's instructions for backyard wildlife habitats found at www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat.

Q: How can gardens or plants be considered historical? Don't you need a building or battlefield where great events occurred?

A: Gardens and plants are a bit of "living history," from the awe-inspiring redwoods in California's Muir Woods to the rosebushes planted more than 200 years ago in the Tudor Place gardens in Washington, D.C. In *Jackson Jones and Mission Greentop*, Jackson realizes that his community garden began more than 60 years ago as a World War II Victory Garden, and figures out how to save it from developers by having it preserved as a historic site. The book also highlights a growing problem: the numbers of community gardens being sacrificed to development. *Jackson Jones and the Curse of the Outlaw Rose* focuses on the historical significance of one plant, antique roses.

Q: The neighborhood bully, Blood Green, appears in all three books. Are bullies really still so prevalent since many schools have taken a zero-tolerance stand?

A: Sadly, bullies are still out there despite increased media attention on and programs aimed at stopping the behavior. As reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, one national survey found that 30% of young people in the United States (about 5.7 million) are involved in bullying, whether as targets of bullies, bullies themselves, or both. That's more than 1 in 4 kids! Jackson and his friends realize that Blood picks on smaller kids in places where he won't be seen by adults and increases his attacks on victims who have told. As Jackson's experiences with Blood demonstrate, targets often have to deal with bullying behavior over a period of time and figure out different ways of protecting themselves.

Q: Any tips for gardening with children?

A: Let kids experiment and have fun! Your garden probably won't be a showplace, but it will be a rich and memorable place for kids. Try giving youngsters their own small patch and encouraging them to grow plants that help support native birds, small mammals, and insects, whose habitats are rapidly disappearing due to development. Try gardening indoors, too, or on apartment balconies with container and herb gardens. (Be prepared for surprises: my daughter poked seeds from a watermelon she had eaten into our wildlife garden--and they grew with such gusto that they took over a large part of what we had carefully cultivated!)

A few helpful organizations and websites include the American Community Gardening Association (www.communitygarden.org), Garden Mosaics Program (www.gardenmosaics.cornell.edu), Junior Master Gardener Program (www.jmgkids.us), National Gardening Association's kids' program (www.kidsgardening.com), and National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program (www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat).

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Jackson Jones and The Curse of The Outlaw Rose

By Mary Quattlebaum

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