

# Biography Resource Center

---

## Mary Kay Carson

1964-

**Birth:** November 18, 1964 in Everett, Washington

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2008.

Entry updated: 05/01/2008

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Career](#)

[Further Readings](#)

[Personal Information](#)

[Sidelights](#)

[Source Citation](#)

[Writings](#)

### "Sidelights"

Mary Kay Carson is the author of *The Wright Brothers for Kids: How They Invented the Airplane*. The book includes not only a history of the Wright Brothers' work, but also a collection of hands-on projects for kids, designed to demonstrate some of the challenges the inventors had to overcome to get the first airplane off the ground. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor praised the book for its "detailed and invigorating history of the Wright Brothers' work." In a review for *School Library Journal*, Harriett Fagnoli noted that "the narrative flows easily and is complemented by numerous photographs that give a sense of history and this event."

Carson once commented: "As a young person, I had no interest in being a writer. Becoming a biologist seemed like the obvious career for me. I've had a fascination with animals since early childhood. I likely inherited it from my mother's family--they're 'animal people.' Stuffed animal toys were soon replaced by a menagerie of pets--goldfish, guppies, gerbils, rats, rabbits, turtles, a ferret, as well as a parade of cats and dogs. I'd spend hours in the basement waiting for our mother cat to once again give birth. Then I'd watch her bring four--it was always four--blind furry kittens into the world. My parents were incredibly tolerant and let me keep nearly any animal I wanted as long as I took care of it. I even raised a couple of rescued baby possums. These pets were often playmates for me, especially after we moved to the country when I was nine. My sister and I would dress the current batch of kittens in baby clothes and 'invite' them to tea and mud pie parties. My little brother and I would race rabbits in the fenced-in dog run. There were no neighbor kids within

walking distance, and we siblings quickly grew tired of each other's company during summer vacations. So I spent a lot of my time exploring the nearby hickory oak forest, violet-filled clearings, and shale creeks with a dog or two in tow. Surely my life-long love and awe of the natural world was sown during those long summer days.

"I never liked school much--too much monotonous routine--though I was a good student. But I did learn to like science, thanks to my engineer dad and a number of dedicated teachers. I have a vivid memory of doing a hands-on science activity in fourth grade that made a real impression on me! I took lots of biology classes in high school and also attended a year of special vocational high school at the Cincinnati Zoo. We worked with the zookeepers caring for the animals in the morning and had regular classes in the afternoon. I studied biology in college, as well, choosing the Systematics and Ecology Record Exam to get into where I wanted to go. I'd have to wait an entire year before retaking them, and there was little work for those with biology undergraduate degrees in 1987. The U.S. Peace Corps, on the other hand, was actively recruiting science majors. I'd never had the money to study abroad or travel much. At twenty-two I'd never been off the North American continent and had only flown in an airliner once as a first grader. I signed up and shipped out--well, flew actually--to the Dominican Republic the fall after graduation.

"The two plus years I spent working as a freshwater fisheries extension agent in the Peace Corps dramatically changed the direction of my life. It was while living in a rural peasant village without telephones, electricity, or running water that I discovered writing. I was the only English speaker in the village. I spoke decent Spanish, but I couldn't make myself understood as completely in Spanish as I could in English. Writing letters became an important outlet for me. They were a way to express myself freely. Luckily I had lots of family and friends to write! I also wrote a few stories and experienced that 'losing track of time' or 'being in the zone' feeling that I think a lot of writers become addicted to! Once out of the Peace Corps in 1989, I looked into graduate school programs for science writing. Writing about science seemed like the perfect union of an old and new love. I was accepted into New York University's Science and Environmental Reporting Program (SERP) for the fall of 1990. I got a job working on a fishing boat in Alaska that summer to save up money. I moved to New York City in time to start NYU. I attended the SERP program that fall but dropped out a year shy of finishing. I'd run out of money and needed to work full time if I wanted to stay in New York. I cobbled together a bunch of part-time jobs doing research for an author, typing letters for a literary agent, working temp jobs, and doing an internship at a National Audubon Society publication.

"Once set on the course of science writing, I hadn't really planned on writing for young people. But I landed a full-time job writing news and feature articles for a science magazine at Scholastic--a science magazine for 4th-6th graders. The creativity of the job forever hooked me on writing for kids. Within the first few months on the job I'd interviewed scientists, written and sketched out a four-paneled cartoon that explained center of mass, helped choose photos to accompany a feature article, traveled to school to interview kids measuring champion trees, came up with story ideas, and assisted the hands-on activities editor in tinkering with experiments set up in the hallway. What a fun place to work!

"Writing for kids allows for a lot more creativity than writing for adults, I think. Plus, it allows you to be forever a generalist. Most of the science writers for adults I know have become very specialized. Focusing on the developments in a narrow scientific field--biomedical engineering or material sciences for example--is how you build credibility with sources and readers as a science journalist. But I really like the diversity of being a generalist, and that's much more acceptable in children's writing. At any given time I might be writing about volcanoes, rhinos, and the Underground Railroad. I often don't know that much about a topic before I start doing research for the book. The process of discovery through research is part of what I like about writing. I'm always learning something new and interesting.

"I really like the process of writing science for kids, too. You have to research and understand your topic extremely well. You can't assume that kids know things, like you can with adults. After you've

taken the information apart to understand it completely, you have to put it back together in a way that kids will understand. The fun part is putting it together in an interesting way that kids will want to read.

"After a couple of years at Scholastic, I caught the travel bug again. I went to Spain and got certified to teach English, traveled around for the summer, and then taught English in northern Spain for a school year. After a bit more travel, I came back to New York and filled in for a temporarily absent staffer at Scholastic for a month, made some good contacts, and decided to try freelancing. I knew it'd be hard to make a living freelancing in New York because it's an expensive place to live. So I went back to where my family was living in Kansas City. A friend had hooked me up with a job teaching English to immigrants and refugees three nights a week, so I'd have some steady income while I got my freelancing career off the ground. That was 1994, and I've been freelancing ever since! I mostly wrote magazine articles and teaching materials for the first few years. My first book was published in 1996. *Space: Hands-On Activities* is a book for teachers with reproducible pages for students, one of many I've since written. The first trade book I wrote for kids was *Epilepsy*, published in 1998. I moved to Cincinnati in 1997 and now mostly write books for kids, though I do write a few adult magazine articles now and again.

"I've been a self-employed writer who works out of a home office for nearly ten years. It's not for everybody! Many freelancers eventually trade in being able to work in their pajamas for the structure, regular salary, and companionship of an office job. People often ask me how I can have enough self-discipline to work as a home-based freelancer. But I don't believe the key is self-discipline--it's organization. I'm afraid that goofy saying, 'Fail to plan . . . Plan to fail' is very true for me!

"Writing *The Wright Brothers for Kids* was a chance to explore a topic in much more depth than I usually get a chance to. The 160-page book is a lot more than just an explanation of the science behind getting an airplane to fly. The book also includes lots of human flight history, a sense of the times in which the Wright brothers lived, fun activities, and the amazing human story of a family that made history. The topic also appealed to me because Wilbur and Orville lived and built their Wright Flyers just north of me in Dayton, Ohio. It was great to be able to visit the nearby places and where they once worked together and lived. *The Wright Brothers for Kids* also offered my husband and me the chance to work together on a larger project. (We'd already done some magazine articles together.) My husband, Tom Uhlman, is a freelance photographer and stringer for the Associated Press. Similar reasons led me to write my . . . book *The Underground Railroad for Kids*. Ohio was heavily traveled by runaways fleeing on the Underground Railroad.

"I hope that my books about animals, nature, and space foster a sense of wonder in kids and give kids a feeling of connection to the natural world. Every one of us is made up of the same stuff that goes into trees, rocks, and stars! I think it's becoming harder and harder for kids to experience that wonder and connection in their daily life. We all spend so much time indoors and at 'scheduled activities.' Books can be a great way to take a little trip someplace completely different, like Mars. Books can also show you something familiar in a new way, like seeing what lives under a log in the forest.

"I also hope that my books make science fun, interesting, and accessible to kids. We live in a world and time where science and technology drive changes affecting our daily lives and the lives of future generations. I feel that it's important for everyday people to understand the basic science behind the technologies we use and the ecosystem we're a part of. Otherwise, we'll all become beholden to 'experts' to make decisions for us about everything from environmental protection, medical ethics, and food safety to the space program."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born November 18, 1964, in Everett, WA; daughter of George Arthur (an industrial hygiene engineer) and Vicky Sue (a social worker; maiden name, Long) Carson; married Thomas Mark Uhlman (a photographer), March 4, 2003. **Education:** University of Kansas, B.S., 1987; attended Science and Environmental Reporting Program, New York University, 1990. **Addresses:** Homeoffice: 4308 Leeper St., Cincinnati, OH 45223. **E-mail:** mkc@fuse.net; mkcarson@nasw.org.

## CAREER

Freelance writer of books, articles and teaching materials for Newbridge, *Science World*, Scholastic, Inc., National Audubon Society, KidsBooks, Chicago Review Press, and other educational companies, 1994--. *SuperScience*, New York, NY, associate editor and writer, 1991-94; Don Bosco Center, Kansas City, MO, and Delta School, Astillero, Spain, teacher of English as a second language, 1993-96. Served as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in La Peñita Arriba, Dominican Republic, 1987-89; worked as a National Marine Fisheries Service observer in Seattle, Washington, 1990.

## WRITINGS:

- *Epilepsy*, Enslow (Berkeley Heights, NJ), 1998.
- *The Creepiest, Scariest, Weirdest Creatures Ever!*, Kidsbooks (Boston, MA), 2002.
- *The Wright Brothers for Kids: How They Invented the Airplane*, Chicago Review Press (Chicago, IL), 2003.
- *Mars*, Chelsea House (New York, NY), 2003.
- *In the Deep*, Chelsea House (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Underground Railroad for Kids*, Chicago Review Press (Chicago, IL), 2004.
- *Exploring the Solar System*, Chicago Review Press (Chicago, IL), 2006.
- *Alexander Graham Bell: Giving Voice to the World*, Sterling Publishing (New York, NY), 2007.

## LEVELED READERS

- *Cool Science Jobs*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Gross Body Facts*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Driving on Mars*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2004.
- *The Bald Eagle Is Back*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2004.
- *The Greatest Electrician in the World*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2004.
- *The Return of Wild Whoopers*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2004.

- *Emi and the Rhino Scientist*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2007.

## PROFESSIONAL TITLES FOR TEACHERS

- *Space: Hands-On Activities, the Latest Information & a Colorful Learning Poster*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 1996.
- *Colonial America: A Complete Theme Unit Developed in Cooperation with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Wow's and Why's of Weather*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Great Weather Activities: All the Background Info and How To's You Need for Teaching about the Wonders of Weather*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Space: Quick & Easy Internet Activities for the One-Computer Classroom*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Weather: Quick & Easy Activities for the One-Computer Classroom*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Easy Science Activity Journals*, Scholastic (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Weather Projects for Young Scientists*, Chicago Review Press (Chicago, IL), 2007.

Author of educational titles for the Newbridge Discovery Links, Newbridge *Ranger Rick* Science Program, and Newbridge Social Studies Links. Contributor to magazines, including *Ohio Magazine*, *Audubon Adventures*, *SuperScience*, *Ranger Rick*, *Missouri Conservationist for Kids*, and *Science World*.

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

### PERIODICALS

- *Daily News* (Dayton, OH), April 7, 2003, "Things to Read and Wright."
- *Publishers Weekly*, March 24, 2003, "Wright Books at the Wright Time," p. 77.
- *School Library Journal*, September, 1998, Christine A. Moesch, review of *Epilepsy*, p. 214; June, 2003, Harriett Fagnoli, review of *The Wright Brothers for Kids: How They Invented the Airplane*, p. 156.
- *Science News*, May 31, 2003, review of *The Wright Brothers for Kids*, p. 351.
- *Washington Post Book World*, May 11, 2003, "The Wright Stuff."

### ONLINE

- *Mary Kay Carson Home Page*, <http://www.marykaycarson.com> (January 12, 2004).

## SOURCE CITATION

*Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2008. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2008. <http://research.cincinnati.library.org:2085/servlet/BioRC>

**Document Number:** H1000154692

