



## An Interview with Author R.J. Palacio

**The worldwide phenomenon *Wonder* showed more than 13 million readers how to choose kind. Now, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author R.J. Palacio is back with an enthralling adventure that will show readers how to choose courage. *Pony* is a modern classic about a boy on a quest to rescue his father, with a ghost as his companion and a mysterious pony as his guide. In this coming-of-age story perfect for Grades 5-8, Palacio spins a harrowing yet distinctly beautiful tale about the power of love and the ties that bind us across distance and time.**

### **What made you decide to leave the world of *Wonder*?**

I really did write *Wonder* as a stand-alone story. So, while I added a few chapters to that story with *Auggie & Me* and *White Bird*, I don't think it's wise for me to turn it into something it wasn't meant to be. I'd rather leave it as its own self-contained world, which I may go back to someday, and concentrate on making new worlds.

### **Where did the idea for *Pony* come from?**

The spark of the story came from a dream my son had years ago when he was 12 or so. It involved a boy in the old West whose face was half-covered in blood. (It was a scary dream!) That vivid imagery

stuck with me, and a story started taking root in my mind about the boy with the half-red face. What happened to him? Who was he? How was he doing? I began to create a world in which that boy could exist. It's unbelievable, in hindsight, that one image could spark an entire novel, but that's really how it came about.

Once the story started forming in my head, I knew it was going to be a quest story in the most traditional sense. The boy embarks on a journey, has a series of revelations, and is never the same. In so many classic hero journeys, the protagonist has both a faithful companion and some kind of wondrous animal to accompany him – in this case, the companion is a ghost, and the animal is Pony.

*"We live in a world we barely understand, full of uncertainties and vast distances separating us. What keeps us together as human beings? What connects us? Love."*

*– R.J. Palacio*

*continued...*

### How different – if at all – was the writing process for *Pony* versus *Wonder*?

They were both very different and very similar at the same time. Very different in that I had a demanding 9-to-5 job when I was writing *Wonder*. My kids were younger. I was a working mom, with all that entails, and I seldom had time to think, much less write. So, in order to actually write *Wonder*, I had to carve time out for myself every night between midnight and 3am. I did that for a year and a half. I know it sounds crazy, but it actually worked for me! And I got used to the rhythm of that schedule and writing when the world was asleep. With *Pony*, I'm now a full-time writer, so my 9-to-5 job *is* writing. My kids are older now. One doesn't even live at home anymore. I have a lot more time on my hands and don't have to struggle to find "quiet" time. So the circumstances around writing both books were quite different.

Where they were very similar experiences, though, was in how, only a few pages into it, the characters became so real to me that they started dictating where the novel would go. In a way, with both books, there were times when I would surprise myself as I was writing, thinking the plot would go one way, and suddenly, out of nowhere, something else happens, and whatever outline I had in my head flies out the window. That's a very joyful experience and hard to explain unless you've been through it. It's the true delight of writing.

### What was the research like?

I've been collecting antique objects for decades – books, cameras, daguerreotypes. The daguerreotypes in my collection influenced the characters in the book, which is why I ended up using them as the chapter openers. So, in some ways, I'd been doing research on some of the topics long before I started writing the book. But once I started actually writing the story and committed to the time and place in which it's set, I immersed myself – for years – in that time period, reading spaghetti Westerns, diaries, firsthand accounts, and literary novels from that era, even taking a class in wet-plate collodion photography so I could better understand early photographic processes. Literally, for several years, that's all I read.

If there's a version of method acting for writers, that's what I was doing. By the time I finally started writing the book, though, it was almost too much information. Four hundred pages and two years into that version of the story, I knew it wasn't the book I wanted to write. So I threw that manuscript away and moved on to other projects. Basically, I had to let several years go by in which the research settled into the recesses of my mind. Before, I had so many notes, so much information.

I knew how many miles and hours an Arabian horse could ride in a day. I knew their provenance, the name of the Bedouin tribe *Pony* had come from. I knew the kind of repeating rifle Chalfont and Beautyman

carried. I knew the different photographic processes, what kind of lanterns were used, the names of real counterfeiterers, the types of horse carts that were driven. I had topographic maps of the woods and the ravines and, well, so much!

### Why did you want to write a historical novel?

I'm not sure. I've always loved historical novels – those James Michener epics were a staple of my reading when I was growing up. In fact, my first draft of *Pony* was well on its way to being that kind of doorstopper, in terms of page count. But I didn't really want to write that. I wanted to write what I like to call a "quick epic." I wanted to write a story that could be read in a few sittings, but have its foundations built inside an epic story that is hinted at between the structure of the lines. Basically, it's like writing historical fiction but without using all the history. Those facts are there, used when needed, but not described or explained. This isn't a history lesson – it's a read. I wanted to keep it simple.

continued...

**Were there any classic books you drew inspiration from for the adventure story? Or any nonfiction books?**

*The Call of the Wild. The Black Stallion. The Road. Coal Black Horse. Eva Moves the Furniture.* These were the books I had near me while writing. I was thrilled when Gayle Forman, who blurbed the book, made a comparison to Jack London! She so got my frame of reference!

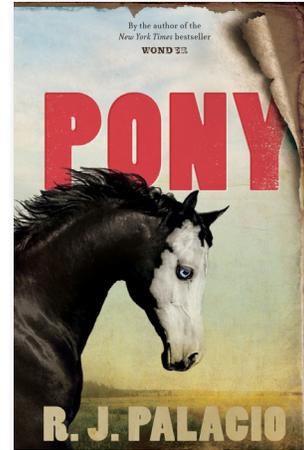
As for nonfiction, I had piles of books that I constantly referred to, including books about counterfeiting in the 1800s, Western outlaws, the history of Arabian horses, early photographic processes, spiritualism, farmers' almanacs from the 1850s, plus a thesaurus and several scientific journals from then, too.

**Do you believe in ghosts?**

I believe that there's more that can't be seen than can be seen. The rest is a mystery. I've never seen a ghost, but I've experienced a sense of connection with loved ones who are no longer here, and whether that's all internal or external, whether there's a science to it or it's just wishful thinking, I can't tell you. I don't know. And that's part of the mystery of life, which is what this book is about. Silas learns to embrace the mysteries.

**In relation to *Wonder*, you've been quoted as saying that the whole book could be summed up, thematically, as a meditation on kindness. Do you have a similar summation for *Pony*?**

I would say that *Pony* is about the connections that bind us. Those connections might not be seen, but they're there, like invisible threads, connecting us to each other, the living to the dead, the past to the future. We live in a world we barely understand, full of uncertainties and vast distances separating us. What keeps us together as human beings? What connects us? Love.



**Pony**

R.J. Palacio • Alfred A. Knopf  
2021 • 5-8

Twelve year old Silas is awoken in the dead of night by three menacing horsemen who take his father away. Silas is left shaken, scared, and alone, except for the presence of his companion, Mittenwool... who happens to be a ghost. When a pony shows up at his door, Silas makes the courageous decision to leave his home and embark on a perilous journey to find his father. Along the way, he will face his fears to unlock the secrets of his past and explore the unfathomable mysteries of the world around him.

R.J. Palacio spins a harrowing yet distinctly beautiful tale about the power of love and the connections that bind us across the expanses of distance and time. For young readers who love the poignant depth of *The Yearling* or *Because of Winn-Dixie*, and adult fans of *True Grit* or the lean, searing prose of Cormac McCarthy, this is one of those rare books for readers of all ages with the makings of a modern classic.



Interview courtesy of  
Random House Childrens Books