

Because You Asked!

Questions & Answers

About *The Recess Queen* and Author Alexis O'Neill



ABOUT WRITING *The Recess Queen*

by Alexis O'Neill

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How did you come up with your story?

This is going to sound incredibly silly, but I began the story because I liked the sound of “mean” “Jean” and “queen” together (and I do hope that any of my friends named Jean do not take my book personally . . .) Then I wondered what Mean Jean would do – and what she kingdom she would reign over. Since recess was (and still is) my favorite part of the day, I made her queen of the playground. The character of Katie Sue was inspired in part by one of my nieces, who on the surface looks quiet and shy but is the most energetic player I know. Other parts of the book were inspired by other nieces, but mostly by my sister, Donna, who has a great sense of humor.

How long did it take you to write your story?

I wrote notes for THE RECESS QUEEN in 1992. The first title was, “Mean Jean, the Playground Queen.” But I just kept putting notes into a folder off and on for a long time. I wrote the first two pages in 1993. I wrote the first full draft in January 1999. Then I workshopped about 6 revisions with my writers group before I sent my story to a publisher in June 1999.

Were you ever bullied as a kid?

I grew up in Wakefield, Massachusetts. My mom sent me to school in cute little dresses and shiny black patent leather shoes every day. Everyone else ran around in sneakers and comfortable clothes. I was teased sometimes, mostly for what I wore. But I managed to escape total ridicule –

probably because I was a bit bossy and pretty good at organizing jump rope and hopscotch in front of the school (something I could do even in shiny shoes) while the others played kickball in the dirt at the back the school.

One day when my best friend teased me just a little too much, we got into a knockdown, drag out fight right there on the playground. The recess bell rang – but we weren't done. We agreed to finish our fight at Moulton Field after school.

That's all I thought about for the rest of the day. What had I done? She was tall and came from a family of six brothers! She would pulverize me! When I changed into my play clothes after school, my mother told me to be back soon. We were going shopping. A little light went on in my head. I walked to Moulton Field. My friend was there – with a ringside audience, too. We pushed and shoved. I managed to stay standing. Suddenly, I looked at my Cinderella watch. "Gotta go," I said. My mom's taking me shopping." She was stunned. Stop a fight to shop? "We'll have to finish another day," I called over my shoulder, happy for the perfect excuse to flee.

But we both knew there wouldn't be another day. We had already forgotten what we were fighting about. We're still friends today. We never again tried to pulverize each other.



When did you become a writer?

I began making up stories even before I went to school. I told them out loud to my family and friends. It was fun to see them laugh or ask, "And what happened next?" In school, I especially liked to write stories when I knew that they would be read out loud. Back then, I had never met any professional writers. I didn't know that people could earn a living as a writer until I grew up. I became a full-time writer in 1986.

What else have you written?

In addition to *THE RECESS QUEEN*, my other books include *LOUD EMILY*, *ESTELA'S SWAP*, two books about the history of Syracuse, New York (one for kids and one for adults) and a book for kids about an artist named Gustav Stickley. I've also written and tons of works for kids' magazines including *Cricket*, *Spider*, *Cobblestone*, *Faces*, *Odyssey*, *Calliope* and *Spider*

At home, I have four drawers in a filing cabinet filled with drafts of stories and ideas for stories. I work on many different kinds of projects at once – both fiction and nonfiction.

Do you enjoy writing books for kids?

I always lose track of time when I'm doing something I love. Does that ever happen to you? Well, I always lose track of time when I'm working on stories for kids. I LOVE doing what I do!

To arrange for author appearances and workshops, contact:

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