

Spotlight on: **Connie Hertzberg Mayo**

March 2017

Biography



Connie Hertzberg Mayo came to Massachusetts to get a literature degree from Tufts University and never left. She first learned about [Thompson Island](#) shortly after graduation and immediately knew it was a great setting for a work of fiction, but it took twenty years and the rise of the internet to make her feel like she could start researching and writing. During the years it took to find the time to write this book, her family made up the adjective “hoop-and-stick” (referencing the turn-of-the-century children’s toy) to describe her penchant for simple things of the past, particularly that have no technology component (as in, “Mom likes chess because it’s so hoop-and-stick”). She works as a Systems Analyst to satisfy her left brain and lives in southern Massachusetts with her husband, two children, two cats, and her heirloom tomato garden.

Connie’s short story, “Little Breaks,” was accepted by [CALYX Journal](#) and will be published in 2017. She has won

the following awards:

- 2016 Gold Medal – Best Regional Fiction, Independent Publisher Book Awards
- 2015 Silver Medal – Historical Fiction, INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award
- 2016 Bronze Medal – Historical Fiction, Readers’ Favorite Award

Interview

1. Obviously, you’ve been selected as Sharon’s 2017 [One Book, One Town](#) author (congratulations!). What has it been like, as a resident of the town, to have your book chosen and discussed by the community?

I was completely shocked. I knew that someone had brought my book to the committee in the spring, but then I forgot all about it. When I heard the news months later, I just kept thinking about all the world-class authors that have been selected for One Book, One Town, and it didn’t seem real. And now all the staff at the Sharon Public Library know me when I come in to check out books, so that is fun.

2. What has been the most interesting or exciting experience you’ve had in Sharon since becoming the town’s One Book, One Town author?

When I saw a text on my son’s phone from his friend that said, “Dude, I didn’t know your mom was an award-winning author! Swag!” (True story.)

3. That's fantastic. As far as living in the greater Boston area goes, were you able to take advantage of the fact that you could go into the city and see the places you were writing about? Or has Boston changed too much over the past century? Scollay Square, for example, is completely different now.

Going to Thompson Island was very informative, even though the main building is no longer there. And I did do a walkabout in Boston—I remember it was on a bitter cold and windy day, so not the best planning. Today's Washington Street is still relevant to my story, but Scollay Square and the West End are gone forever, and I found that sad (especially when staring at the concrete block that is our City Hall). But the saving grace of that winter day was that I went to the [West End Museum](#), which is small but right up my alley.

4. I understand that *The Island of Worthy Boys* is your first novel, and that it took you some time to develop the story out of the initial inspiration of visiting Thompson Island. Why do you think the process of writing took place over a number of years? Did you write steadily, or in bursts? Is there a point at which the story reached critical mass, so to speak?

So for pretty traditional lives like mine, I think there are three general age ranges in which you can write: young, middle-aged, and AARP. I had my idea for this book when I was young, but I didn't have time to do anything about it. Even if there had been an Internet back then, I was working full time and having too much fun to do something so disciplined. And honestly, had I written the book in my twenties it would have been awful. I just didn't know that much about life—how could I write about twelve-year-old boys when I never even had a brother? I'm so glad I never tried writing this book back then. When I became middle-aged (and all the math tells me that's where I am), I had a little more time since I was working part-time, but WAY more things to do, with two children in middle school. But it was the right time for me—it was the exact opposite of going to the pediatrician and heating up chicken nuggets and filling out school forms. It was creative—I could write anything I wanted (unlike on the school forms where my creativity is not appreciated). When I reach the AARP stage, assuming I'm still reasonably sharp, I think that might be my most productive time—more free time and even more life experience.

So because I wrote when I had young children, I definitely wrote in bursts. A few hours at a time. During the three years it took me to write the first draft, the longest pause I ever had was about a month. The thing that drove me back to writing that time was, and this sounds demented, I felt bad for my characters—I had left them in some dire straits and I felt guilty about leaving them stuck there. But when I got to the last of the three parts in the book, I had serious momentum, and I had very few breaks from there until the end. Mostly because I wanted to see how it would all turn out.

5. The book's ending is a happy one—well, relatively happy. How did you ultimately decide on that ending?

I wanted to emphasize that this school was an oasis in an otherwise somewhat bleak environment for kids in poverty. So I felt strongly that Charles and Aidan were going to come out OK in the end. But not everyone ends well. Without divulging any spoilers for people who

have not read or finished the book, I will say that kids are malleable and can often rise out of their circumstances, but not all adults can make that transition.

6. What is your favorite scene from *The Island of Worthy Boys*, and why?

Several are my favorites. I loved writing the scene where Lucifer is on trial. I had a lot of fun writing the part where Charles gets his first kiss. And the chapter where Charles meets the prostitute that becomes his only friend really entertained me. In fact, it's possible that I wrote this whole book just to keep myself entertained.

7. The book is certainly entertaining, but there are so many different, deeper themes that you engage throughout the story—the idea of “worthiness,” for instance. And in fact, one of the characters who most intrigued me was headmaster Charles Bradley, who is based on the actual superintendent of the Farm School at the time. How did you go about bringing Bradley to life on the page? Did you have access to correspondence, journals, or other records that he left behind? Or is your version of Bradley a fictionalized extrapolation of the real-life individual?

The [archives for the Boston Farm School](#) are at UMass Boston, and I went there several times to dig through their boxes. I found a bunch of letters to Bradley from alumni thanking him for kind things he did, like getting them a good job or lending them money. There were articles about how he supported the boys building Cottage Row, and brought the boys to the mainland for excursions. There was also just a lack of any negative press, at a time where the reform school in Westboro had plenty of bad press for their corruption and cruelty. So I concluded that he was a good guy, crossing my fingers that I was right. And I have since heard from two different men whose fathers were students there during the Bradley era, and they confirmed that my guess was a good one.

8. Are you planning to write a second book? (And if so, what can you tell us about it?)

Yes! I had even started the second book, but had to put it on hold due to multiple family issues that had to take priority. But the plan is to resume when my daughter goes off to college this fall. The setting of the book is the [New York Cancer Hospital](#), established in the 1890s—the building still stands on Central Park West, but it's condos now. It was the first cancer-only hospital in the country, and it was needed because many hospitals would turn cancer patients away, believing cancer to be contagious. To me, it's a fascinating and slightly horrifying time in medicine, because ether had been discovered decades before, and so doctors were very confident about performing long surgeries on unconscious patients. The problem was that they didn't really know what they were doing once they opened up the body. There was a lot of experimentation and not a lot of patient consent, so I want to explore questions of medical ethics, through the eyes of a young woman who thinks she understands right and wrong in the world until she becomes a nurse's assistant at the hospital. Anyone who likes [The Knick](#) on Cinemax would probably like this book!

9. It's pretty clear that you did extensive research for *The Island of Worthy Boys*, and it sounds like your new project will require some significant research too. How did

you go about researching your first book? What habits or sources will you carry through—or not—for the second one?

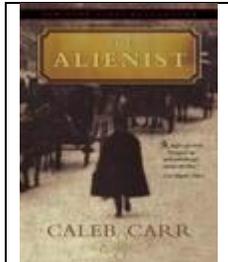
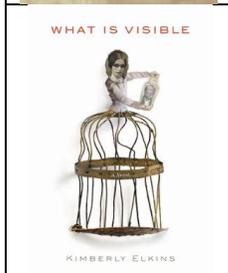
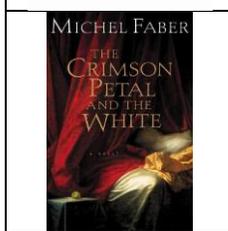
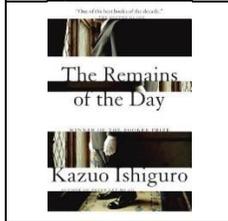
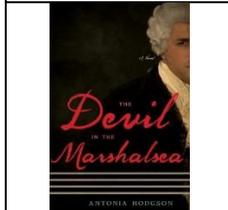
*I'm trying Scrivener for the second book—it's software that helps you keep your writing and your research organized. I think there will be more research needed for the second book as compared to the first. For *The Island of Worthy Boys*, I was very fortunate that the newspaper that the boys published—The Beacon—starting in the 1890s, is all available [online](#); some saint at the UMass Boston Archives scanned in every page. That was a huge source of information for me about what it was like to be a boy at that school way back when. Another difference between the books is that I didn't start with an outline for *The Island of Worthy Boys*. I somehow had a sense of the structure and just wrote it, though I did retroactively outline it to identify and fix a few problems. But for the second one, I plan to use an outline early on. One thing that seems like it will be the same is that I didn't come up with a title for the first one until the very end, and I don't feel like I'm on the brink of a good title for the second one at this point. Not that I haven't tried. Titles are hard! They are really important. I was very happy with the title of my first book, so I have to figure out how to be satisfied with the next one too.*

10. What advice would you give to other writers who are just starting out on their own projects and drafts?

Read the genre in which you want to write, and read a lot of it. When you like something, think about why you like it. And even more important, when you don't like something, figure that out too. Notice where you decided to stop reading—why put the book down exactly at that point? Notice the balance of narrative description versus dialogue. Overall, was the concept of the story good but the execution subpar? Or the other way around—did you read the description and think “meh” but then the reading experience was great? (Ideally, as a writer, you want both—a gripping description on the book flap and also gripping writing in every chapter.) When it comes to the writing part, I believe in the adage, “Write the book you would want to read.” You have to really love your story and your characters—you will be spending A LOT of time with them. Create a story where you just have to keep going because you find it so damn interesting.

6 Books Connie Recommends



	<p><u>The Alienist</u> by <i>Caleb Carr</i></p>
	<p><u>What is Visible</u> by <i>Kimberly Elkins</i></p>
	<p><u>The Crimson Petal and the White</u> by <i>Michel Faber</i></p>
	<p><u>The Remains of the Day</u> by <i>Kazuo Ishiguro</i></p>
	<p><u>The Devil in the Marshalsea</u> by <i>Antonia Hodgson</i></p>