

# book | *news*

from North Carolina

**The University of North Carolina Press**

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**Note: For images see the end of interview.**

## Celebrating Taffy's 50th Birthday

Nell Wise Wechter's prize-winning *Taffy of Torpedo Junction* has delighted readers of all ages for decades. Wechter, a North Carolina native who died in 1989, tells the adventures of the 13-year-old Taffy in the Outer Banks during World War II. The book was first published in 1957 and went out of print in 1995. One year later, the University of North Carolina Press obtained the paperback rights and continued to publish *Taffy*. This year, on May 9, Taffy will celebrate her 50th birthday. The following is a conversation with Wechter's daughter, Marcia Kass, about the book's importance, the joy of celebrating its 50th anniversary, and its ability to be enjoyed for years to come.

**Q: TAFFY OF TORPEDO JUNCTION has been called "perhaps the best piece of children literature ever produced in (North Carolina)." What makes this story so phenomenal?**

**A:** First of all, it's based in truth. Mother experienced everything that she wrote about in the book—everything is something that really happened. Second, she told the story so vividly. She brought to life things that people had never actually experienced, but when they read them they felt as if they had been there. The story just had so much authenticity. Mother had a gift for language and for writing conversation—she was able to capture the flavor of the Outer Banks and of the people who lived there.

**Q: What was your reaction when you discovered the book was going out of print in 1995? And how did you feel when the decision was made to reprint it just one year later?**

**A:** When it went out of print I was distraught; I was in tears. I couldn't believe it, and I said this just cannot be allowed to happen. I called a few people, among them Dennis Rogers of the (Raleigh) News and Observer. Dennis shared my dismay, and he began the campaign that turned into a nationwide story. We just couldn't let Taffy die. And I'm eternally grateful to UNC Press for having the foresight to take Taffy on. It's given her a whole new life and generation of fans.

**Q: Do you think the audience will appreciate Taffy's story differently than they did when it was first told?**

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**A:** I think so. There aren't many people alive now who were alive back then. The story will have to stand more on its own merits and less on the memories of those who lived through the kinds of things that happened in the book. She may have a whole new group of fans in this generation. And kids need to learn history now more than ever before—so many children live strictly in the present. They need to know where their parents and their grandparents came from, the history of their family, and how good they have it today.

**Q: What was it like being around your mother as she was writing this book?**

**A:** It was like being on a roller coaster! Writers are a volatile lot, and the pride of authorship is a delicate thing. Mother would go on emotional waves. She would pound on her typewriter so hard that you could hear it a mile away. If she got negative feedback from her publisher, it could send her into the depths of despair. But she was a person of great determination. She kept at it, and she ended up with a product that has withstood the test of time.

**Q: Do you think you inspired any part of Taffy's character?**

**A:** I don't think I did, but I think Carol Dillon certainly did. Carol was about twenty years my senior, and was one of my mother's students during World War II. Mother was single when she first began teaching, and she lived in a boardinghouse that was run by Carol Dillon's mother, Maud White. And many of the other characters were based on people who lived around my mother. You can bet that Maud was the model for Mrs. Oden, the postmistress. She was a sweet lady, but she had a sharp tongue. Big Jens was modeled after my father, who was a Coast Guardsman on the Outer Banks during World War II. I'm sure other children whom my mother taught were models for children in the book.

**Q: Your mother was a very accomplished author of children's literature. How does TAFFY OF TORPEDO JUNCTION compare to her other books?**

**A:** By far, *Taffy* is my mother's best book. It was her first, and I think it's her best. *Betsy Dowdy* is very interesting too. It has a heroine who is similar to Taffy—a brave teenager who is very patriotic. Betsy and Taffy shared a lot of characteristics. *Swamp Girl* was actually written about my adventures as a little girl—a lot of the things that happened in the book happened to me. So that's my personal favorite, selfishly. And *Teach's Light* was difficult for my mother because she was dealing with a genre that she was unfamiliar with—science fiction. But she did a wonderful job—when you get to the end and she's describing the sulfur, you can really smell the sulfur.

**Q: What is your favorite part of Taffy's adventures?**

**A:** I think my favorite part was when she found Brandy. That was very exciting—you want to just grab him up and hug him. Brandy was also modeled after a dog that lived in our neighborhood in Greensboro—a little boxer named Brandy, too. Again, you just read the things that happen, and you feel as if you were there and they were happening to you.

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**Q: TAFFY OF TORPEDO JUNCTION certainly appeals to young children growing up near the ocean. Do you think it appeals equally to children elsewhere?**

**A:** Yes, it does. Taffy appeals to children everywhere. Her characteristics, as author Bland Simpson so aptly described them in his foreword, are admirable. She is brave and independent and curious; she is respectful to her elders; she is responsible. She has all those attributes that we all aspire to, or used to when we were young.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with Marcia Kass, daughter of Nell Wise Wechter, author of TAFFY OF TORPEDO JUNCTION (University of North Carolina Press, August 1996).

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