

BOOKS

BOOK REVIEW

A HOPEFUL TALE WITH HEART, SOUL AND A LOVE OF NARNIA

Claudia N. Oltean

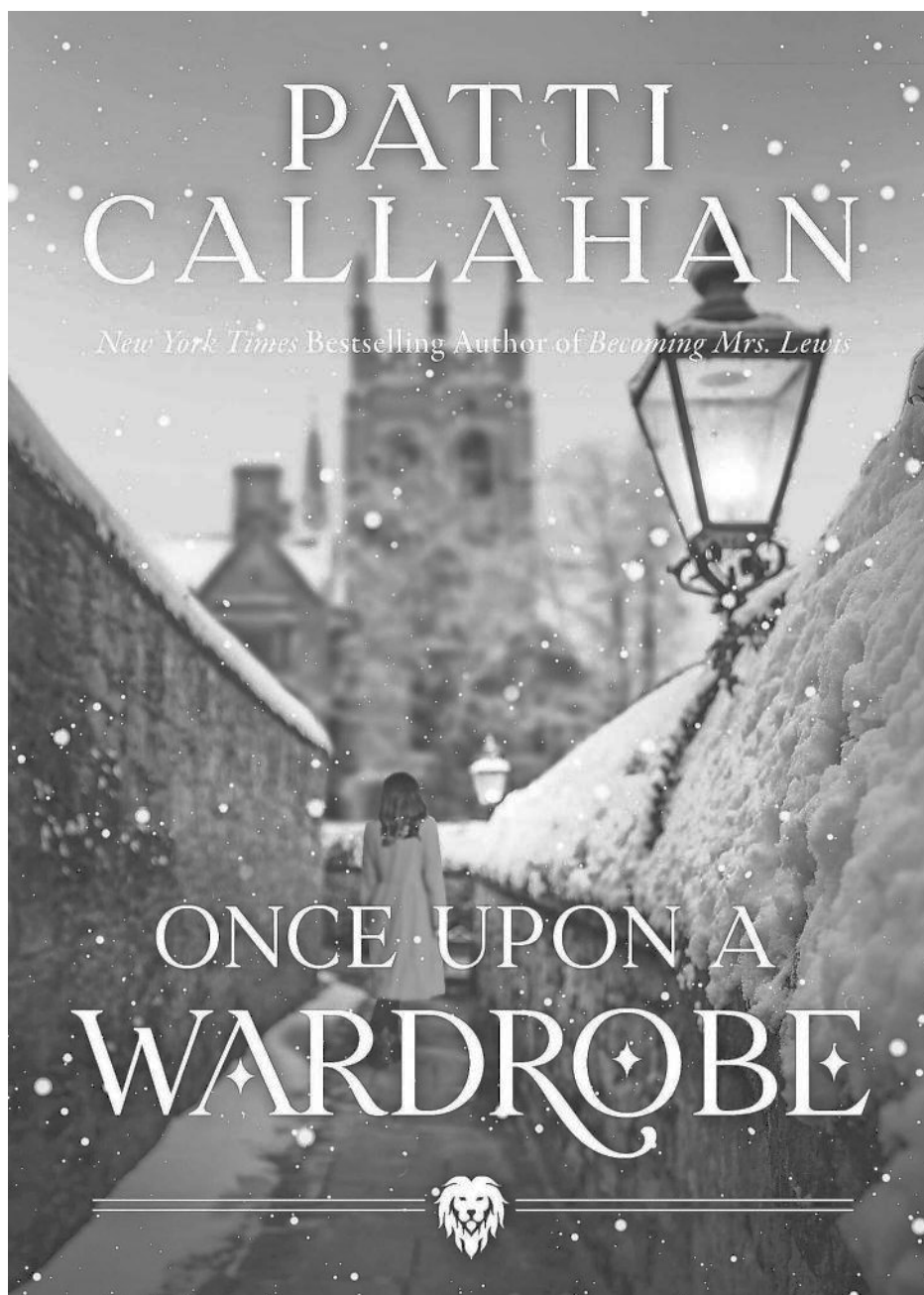
Special to Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

“Once Upon a Wardrobe”
Author: Patti Callahan
HarperCollins, 311 pages, \$24.99
With “Once Upon a Wardrobe,” best-selling author Patti Callahan has given us a rare gift—a historical novel with both charm and depth. It starts in December 1950 in Worcester, England where we meet precocious 8-year-old George Devonshire and his 17-year-old sister, Megs. George was born with a defective heart that doctors say won’t see him past his fifth birthday. He’s already beaten those odds, but his sister, who loves him dearly, fears he will not beat them much longer.

Megs is a math and physics student at Oxford University. She loves and understands the language of equations and hopes to become a professor one day. To her, all the important things in life are logical, factual and can be proven.

Her little brother lives wholly in his imagination. His mostly bedridden world is inhabited by the images and ideas in adventure and fantasy stories. He’s enthralled with a new book by C.S. Lewis, “Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.” It transports him to a wondrous place and he longs to inhabit it. Megs comes home from university often to spend as much time as possible with George. On one such visit, he begs her for a favor—find out where Narnia came from. She is taken aback with what seems a frivolous question that would require her to approach the author, a respected teacher at her own university. Out of love for George, she promises to try and find out.

Several times Megs braves the freezing cold sitting outside Lewis’ home, the Kilns, but her nerve always fails her. Then fate steps in, and the author’s brother, Warnie, appears and invites her to come in, get warm and meet his brother, Jack—who turns out to be the author C.S. Lewis. Megs receives such a welcome reception from these men she steels herself to explain about her brother’s condition and his fascination with Jack’s new book. She relays George’s burning question: Where did Narnia come from? This scene brings us to the heart and soul of a story that has heads of both.



"Once Upon a Wardrobe" by Patti Callahan HARPERCOLLINS

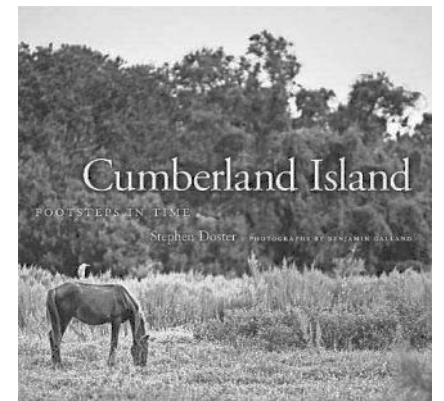
Jack doesn’t offer Megs a direct answer, but over several visits tells her stories from his own life. Though frustrated at first, she listens closely, then scrambles off to write everything down to read to George. These sessions are precious to both of them and, much to her surprise, Megs transforms into a storyteller. Her view of the world shifts—perhaps imagination and facts are both important.

Author Callahan’s novel is brilliantly plotted and lusciously told as she

blends the story of Megs, her brother and their family, with that of Lewis and how he came to write the Narnia Chronicles—beloved by readers of all ages for decades. I highly recommend this beautiful novel to fans of Lewis’s, the Narnia Chronicles and lovers of stories that fire the joy and magic inside each of us.

Jacksonville author Claudia N. Oltean is currently completing a two-book series set during Prohibition/The Roaring 20s. www.oltean.com.

BOOKMARKS



History

Historian Stephen Doster, author of “Cumberland Island: Footsteps in Time,” has been commissioned to create a similar book about Amelia Island. He will discuss his work to date at 4 p.m. Saturday at Story & Song Bookstore, 1430 Park Ave., Fernandina Beach.

Unforgettable

Gainesville author William Hatfield discusses “Creating Memorable Characters No One Can Forget” at the 10 a.m. Saturday meeting of the FWA Ponte Vedra Writers group, which, because of repairs at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library, will be held in Room 106 at Christ Episcopal Church, 400 San Juan Drive, Ponte Vedra Beach. Free and open to all.

For kids

Storytime with Ms. Dearsha, 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Story & Song Bookstore, 1430 Park Ave., Fernandina Beach.

Barnes & Noble Town Center Storytime, 2 p.m. Thursday, “First Day Critter Jitters” by Jory John.

Virtual

Baker Paul Hollywood discusses “Bake: My Best Ever Recipes for the Classics,” 7 p.m. Tuesday Barnes & Noble online, ticketed, see bnpaulhollywood.eventbrite.com,

Mystery debut author Katie Lattari discusses “Dark Things I Adore,” 3 p.m. Thursday Barnes & Noble online, see bnkatielattari.eventbrite.com to register.

Send Bookmarks information to brandysbookmarks1@outlook.com (don’t forget the 1). Announcements must arrive seven days before the Sunday of publication. Events free and open to all unless stated and always subject to change.

BOOK REVIEW

Selma Blair confronts life, illness in memoir

Mims Cushing

Special to Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

“Mean Baby: A Memoir of Growing Up”

Author: Selma Blair
Knopf, 303 pages, \$30

It wasn’t until she was in her midlife that the actress Selma Blair discovered what had caused her so many ailments. She had pain everywhere. Parts of her felt like they were on fire. She suffered with electric shocks, fell constantly, and parts of her were numb.

For decades, doctors told her the problem was all in her head. She self-medicated with alcohol from the time

she was a young child, sneaking into parks to drink half-finished bottles of beer and wine left there by derelicts. She frequented healers, astrologists, even a tarot card reader in search of help. Finally, when she was in her late 40s, a spinal neurologist ordered an MRI and diagnosed her with multiple sclerosis. He saw lesions on her brain that are consistent with MS.

She tells her story in “Mean Baby: A Memoir of Growing Up.” Why was she called “mean baby”? From



Day One, she was born with a scowl. She bit her sisters and lied constantly. Many years later, wanting to become an actress, she moved from her home in Michigan to New York City, doing 60 auditions that got her nowhere, then dived into Los Angeles and onto the big screen with such productions as “Cruel Intentions,” and “Legally Blonde.” A large part of the book deals with her connections with

motion picture celebrities: Reese Witherspoon, Claire Danes, Michelle Pfeiffer,

Jennifer Grey and the fashion industry’s Karl Lagerfeld and Christian Siriano.

In the last third of “Mean Baby” she addresses MS somewhat more fully. She underwent a difficult stem cell transplant procedure that helped her. But most of the book deals with her life, enduring many sexual assaults as well as her difficulties with her career. In the documentary “Introducing Selma Blair,” she describes how she lives with MS. She was named a Time Person of the Year in 2017 and nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album for her narration of “Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl.”

Mims Cushing lives in Ponte Vedra Beach and has written three books.

BOOK REVIEW:

Bird, piano prodigy team up in mystery rich in history

C.F. Foster

Special to Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

“Duet”

Author: Elise Broach
Christy Ottaviano Books, 294 pages, \$16.99

“Duet” is a fascinating story for middle-grade readers told through the eyes of Mirabelle, a young goldfinch who loves to sing and sees herself as a musical star.

Mirabelle lives in a nest with two

brothers and her mother in the backyard of an elderly music teacher. She listens to the music and loves to sing along. She becomes enamored by one of his pupils, Michael, a young piano prodigy who specializes in Chopin. After a ragged start, they become friends and learn to communicate as she helps Michael prepare for an important music competition. Along the way they become involved in solving a mystery that involves Chopin and the pianos he loved to play.

In “Duet,” best-selling children’s and

middle-grade author Elise Broach takes us inside the world of Chopin, and his friends, author George Sand and painter Eugene Delacroix, in a book that all ages will enjoy. Readers will also learn in depth about the habits of goldfinches.

All in all, a fast-paced, history-rich, imminently readable adventure that will have readers hooked as they root for the boy and bird in this well-told novel, full of emotion and suspense.

C.F. Foster lives in Riverside.

