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The Story of My Life

Growing up, I never thought of my life as different or unique. Everything seemed normal because I had no perspective to allow comparison. Life was simply life, and all life was normal. That is how it is with most children, I'd guess. I say this because many times people have told me my past was hard or tragic. Yes, that can be said now, but at the time, it seemed normal. I never questioned being born in Bolivia, South America, growing up with revolutions and my skin a different color than most of the other children around me.

I learned early in life what it was like to be teased for being different. Kids called me a Gringo and smeared mud in my face.

They would laugh and say; "Now you're not a Gringo!" I remember looking at my skin as an eight-year-old and disliking myself solely for the color of my skin. I grew painfully aware that I was different from other Bolivian kids, but I assumed that this was the life of every white child in the world. Maybe that is why it came as a surprise many years later when I moved to the United States and discovered that my life would become even more difficult around white-skinned Americans.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.



Born in La Paz, Bolivia, South America, one of six children, I was raised bilingual with Spanish actually being my strongest language at one point during my earlier years. Home was the Altiplano, the high plains at fourteen thousand feet above La Paz. My lungs developed differently. Even today, I can hold my breath for over four minutes and blow up a balloon underwater. At fourteen thousand feet, there wasn't much air to transfer temperature, so if a shadow falls across a mud puddle, the shaded side froze and the other side didn't. At that altitude, it takes all day to boil an egg, and we used pressure cookers to cook most things.

If you have never used a pressure cooker, you are probably lucky. There is a weight that sits on the top and keeps the pressure in. The problem is this: if the pressure gets too high, the weight blows off and everything inside the cooker (including the food) sprays out and gets all over the walls and ceilings. For me, life became that way sometimes. And for some reason, when the pressure cooker blew its top, it always seemed to be my fault. My parents were very strict fundamental missionaries who always had time for all of their religious meetings, devotions, services and work, but seldom spent time with their children.



For this reason, every one of us children was raised very self-reliant and adventurous. On my first trip at five-years-old to the United States, we rode a train all the way across Brazil to Rio de Janeiro, took a freighter up to Miami, and then a car cross-country to Minnesota. Since then, I have traveled around the world, from Africa to the North Pole. A few years ago, I drove a car overland, 15,000 miles from Montana to the tip of South America, the Terra del Fuego.

Because of my age and where we lived in Bolivia, I was too young to go to the boarding school my older brother and sisters attended, and so I remained at home. This would have been okay, but I was never home schooled either. As a result, my very first day of education was at nine-years-old, away at a boarding school, removed from everything and everybody I had ever known. I remember it being a very traumatic time in my life, and something that filled me with bitterness and resentment. I felt like my family was abandoning me.

From the very beginning, I was one of the defiant and problem students at boarding school. Being a very strict school run by English matrons and a headmaster, I was strapped on the hands with a leather strap every time I did something wrong, which seemed to be nearly every week. Sometimes the strappings were so severe, I needed to have my hands bandaged. I do remember setting the school record of four strappings, a record that incidentally stood many years after the school was closed and the headmaster was fired for child abuse.



When I was sent away to school, the only fond memory I have of that time was riding a DC-3 to Cochabamba, down in the Bolivian lowlands. During the flight, I sneaked up and peaked into the cockpit. The co-pilot caught me peeking in and motioned for me to come into the cockpit. I thought

I was in trouble, but instead, he showed me all the instruments and what each instrument did. Then he stood up and let me sit in the seat. It was like sitting in a spacecraft. He showed me how pulling back on the yoke would make the DC-3 go up. Pushing forward forced us down. I could even bank the big plane by just turning the wheel. It was so cool. As I tugged that big plane around the sky, all the people in the back probably just thought it was rough air. When I finished, the pilot knelt down in the narrow space between the seats and looked me right in the eye.

“You’ve flown before, haven’t you, Son?” he said.

“No!” I stammered. “Well, you ought to. `Cause you’re a natural pilot. “I remembered from that day on wanting to someday be a pilot. But that would have to wait. Immediate life at boarding school was nothing short of survival. I was known as the dummy because I couldn’t read or write. Bullies shouted, “Hey dummy, how do you spell your name?” Of course, I didn’t know. And I wasn’t treated remedially as a student, but punitively.

If I tried as hard as I could on an assignment and it was bad, the matrons didn’t get me with a teacher to help me catch up to the other students. Instead, they strapped me and told me to do better tomorrow or I would get another strapping. It filled me with absolute terror.

One of the matrons, Mrs. Williams, was an absolute tyrant. Every time I did something wrong, she would shout at me, “Ben, you’re going to make me flop over in my grave!” My memories of Mrs. Williams are not flattering. I remember her profile as being square. She had her hair tied up in a bun so tightly, it looked like she had a face lift.

She had a chain hanging from her glasses, but it wasn’t anything delicate. It was a logging chain. Her dress came down to the middle of her shins, and her thick socks made her legs look like posts.

One odd thing was that her legs were perfectly parallel going into her dress. What happened above hemline was an anatomical mystery to me.

Anyway, I have always had the Mrs. Williams Six Flop test on my books. Every book I write, I want to know that if Mrs. Williams read it, she would flop over in her grave at least six times. If I can accomplish this, I think students will love the book. When I wrote *Touching Spirit Bear*, I imagined Mrs. Williams flopping over in her grave at least a dozen times by the time I got to chapter eight. That book has been very successful.

Anyway, it was away at boarding school that I first learned to work in a wood shop. I nearly cut my thumb off on a table saw making a ping-pong paddle, but I learned that I could create wonderful things with my hands. Years later I would become an Industrial Arts teacher with a comprehensive minor in woods. My fascination wasn't limited to wood, however. I also became intrigued with gunpowder. My allowance each week was five cents. I always used four cents to buy firecrackers. I'd break the firecrackers in half and empty out the powder. With this powder, I learned to make really big firecrackers and pipe cannons.

Another thing I discovered was writing. Even though I could barely read or write, I learned quickly that I could put anything I wanted down on paper and it became my secret. I was a very angry young boy, and so I wrote bad and dirty words, but I discovered I could express defiance without being strapped. I hate to say this is how my writing began, but it was. For me it was a safe way to defy the world that I was so afraid of and angry at.

Writing began as simply a way to escape the not-so-good things happening in my life. But with time, I learned to create stories, stories that didn't have bullies or headmasters, stories where I was the same as every other student, and stories where I was really smart. Soon I began creating worlds with two moons and worlds filled with magic and dragons and sorcerers. I didn't like to cry, but when I wrote, I allowed myself to cry because nobody was looking.

Writing stories carried some risk. At boarding school, we slept in dorm rooms in steel framed beds. Each night the headmaster would barge in and announce, "Lights out in five seconds!" Then he counted, "Five, four, three, two, one," and SNAP! The lights went off. "Go to sleep NOW!" he ordered.

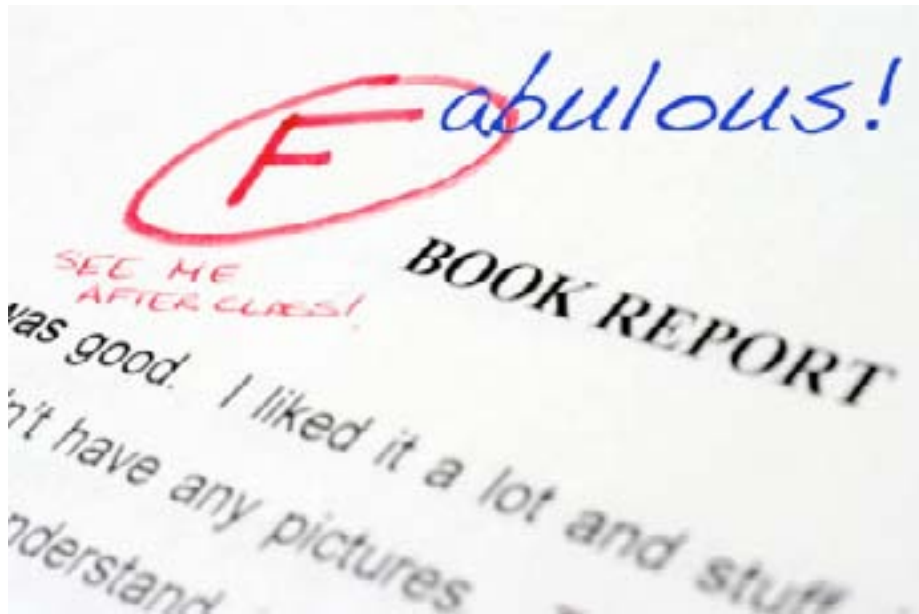
And you went to sleep, OR ELSE!

The problem was, I always had an active imagination with wonderful ideas and stories bouncing around in my head. Every night, after all the other kids fell asleep, I'd lay awake in the dark, grinning and giggling at my ideas. And so, I started taking a piece of paper to bed at night with me. I hid a flashlight under my pillow, and every night after the headmaster shut the lights out, I pulled the covers over my head and knelt with the flashlight in my mouth. With paper and pencil in front of me, I continued becoming a writer. It was there on those blank pages, under the covers, afraid of a strapping by the headmaster that I really began to discover the magic that would someday make me a published author.

I must admit to being caught one night. The headmaster came into the room for bed check and snapped on the light to look around the dorm room. He found everybody asleep until he looked over at my bed, and it looked like there was a camel in my bed. He stomped over and jerked the covers back. With a snarl, he grabbed the flashlight. Glaring at me, he took the back off the flashlight and dumped the batteries into his pocket. Then he slammed the flashlight onto the bed-stand and said, "Go to sleep, NOW! Or you'll be strapped!"

I obediently closed my eyes until he left the dorm, then I reached under my mattress where I had extra batteries hidden. I put them into the flashlight and kept writing because I hadn't finished my story yet. I guess I should have known back then that I was becoming a writer, but I truly didn't suspect it because I could barely spell. My hand

writing looked like hen-scratch. Every paper I got back had a big fat F on it. By the way, the first F I received, I thought it stood for Fabulous.



Life had bigger problems, however, than racism and boarding school and bad writing. Bolivia was a country of turmoil that has had many revolutions. Because of this, I lived through three revolutions during my life in Bolivia. During the first revolution, my crib was placed under the window on the second floor of our home, and then my crib was covered with a sheet so glass wouldn't fall on me if a bullet was shot into the room. Placing my crib under the window was actually the safest place because a bullet was less likely to ricochet and hit me.

The second and third revolutions I remember well. For the first time I saw a person shot in the back. I also witnessed my first execution. In Bolivia, when a revolution ends, nobody touches the bodies for about a week because there are still snipers around sympathetic to the losing side. Because of this, the bodies lie around in the sun and get bloated. As children, we had a natural curiosity of the dead. We giggled as we sneaked up to the bodies and poked them with sticks. This was as normal to our lives as eating ice cream cones or riding skate-

There were other things that also seemed normal. In Bolivia, when a village killed a cow for slaughter, they would cut the jugular artery and let the blood pool in the chest cavity. Then everybody in the village lined up with a cup in their hand and got a cup of warm cow blood to drink. This was a delicacy. As kids, we used to line up for our cup of cow blood until the other missionaries caught us and told our parents. That put a halt to that. The cow blood, by the way, tasted a little like thick warm chocolate, except it wasn't as sweet and it was a bit salty.

Another thing I remember was the poverty. Most families owned little more than an adobe hut and a couple of sheep. When a mother sheep died and left a bum lamb, they couldn't let the baby lamb die. And because families were large and many of the women seemed to always be pregnant, the women would use their own breasts to nurse the bum lambs. When we sat on the dirt floor of the little church on Sunday mornings, there were always three or four women sitting around nursing bum lambs off their own breasts. Again, this was normal and we hardly paid it any attention.

Many years later in Minnesota, sitting in a huge opulent Lutheran church in Northfield, with pews, big stained glass windows and fancy organ pipes, I looked around and asked my parents why none of the women were nursing bum lambs. They explained quickly that things like that weren't done in the United States. I asked "Why not?"

I learned quickly that I wasn't supposed to ask questions and that there were many other things in the United States that were different from Bolivia.

It was at the end of my sixth grade, still barely able to read a comic book, when my parents told me "Ben, we're moving to the United States of America, to a state called Minnesota."

My parents answered sarcastically, “Yeah, there’s a couple. Why?”

“I’m tired of being different,” I answered.

I was so relieved arriving in Minnesota, because I found many students with the same colored skin as my own. I had thought the color of my skin was what had made me so different. Of course, I was wrong. My first day in Northfield, Minnesota, I tried to impress all the other kids, who I thought were just like me now because their skin was the same color. I wore to school the best clothes I had, which was my school uniform from boarding school in Bolivia. I wore black and white saddle shoes; white bobby socks with red tassels on the side, baggy leather knicker shorts with big fat wide suspenders, a blouse-sleeved shirt, and even a bow tie. Man, I looked good!

Right away, one girl that I thought was really cute yelled, “Hey, everyone, look at the dork!” Suddenly she didn’t seem so cute anymore.

The first day I didn’t worry about the teasing because I heard some of the boys talking about playing football after school. This excited me because I was one of the best football players on our team at boarding school.

Of course, I didn’t realize that the game football we played in Bolivia was really American soccer. Down there, we called it futball.

Anyway, the boys brought out the most bizarre ball I’d ever seen in my life. The silly thing was pointed on both ends.

To make things worse, they carried it with their hands, threw it, and tackled each other.



These were all things not allowed in the football I was used to. So, when they threw the ball to me, I did exactly what I thought I should do and started kicking the silly looking ball.

Right away one of the bullies came up to me and shoved me. "You're not supposed to kick it!" he shouted.

"Then why do you call it a football?" I asked. "If you kicked it with your belly button, you would call it a Belly Button ball!"

That was the first day he beat me up.

Once again, the teasing resumed. Sometimes I got beaten up every day of the week. The result was I spent more and more time by myself. Sometimes I would get into trouble, but most of the time, I spent writing down stories. Still I didn't think of myself as a writer because my writing wasn't neat. Nearly every other word was spelled incorrectly. My handwriting was blocky printed letters that looked like a second grader had written them. And still I could barely read.

One day I skipped class and was looking for someplace at school to get into trouble. I went into the library and the librarian came over and asked me what I wanted. Well, I couldn't tell her I was skipping class and looking for someplace to get into trouble, so I told her I'd come in to look for a book.

"I've noticed you," she said. "You don't seem to have many friends."

"I don't need any," I said like a tough kid.

"Well, what do you like?" she said.

I shrugged. "I like to fly. I take lessons out at Stanton."

“What kind of plane do you fly?” she asked.

“I fly a 1967 Cessna 150 with a Continental 0-200 engine. On a cool day if there isn’t much fuel on board, I can push the nose down a little and go 110 miles per hour,” I exclaimed.

She smiled. “So you like to fly?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I think I have a book you’d like,” she said.

Again I shrugged. “Whatever.” I didn’t tell her I could barely read.

Well, she brought out a silly looking book with a seagull on the front. The name was even sillier. It was Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

“I don’t want to read about a stinking seagull,” I muttered. “Seagulls poop!”

“Oh no, this isn’t about just any seagull,” the librarian said. “This is about a little gull that all of his life has been picked on.”



“I know that program,” I muttered. “So, what did he do?”

“Well, he decided he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life fighting over food and eating fish guts, so one day he decided to leave the flock and fly to the distant cliffs. Then he spread his wings and rode the updrafts until he became a little speck against the sun. Then he pulled one wing in and learned how to do barrel-rolls. Then he learned flips and snap-rolls. Then he pulled both wings straight back and learned to dive straight down at over two-hundred miles per hour, faster than any seagull had ever flown in history.”

“A dumb little seagull did all those things?” I asked, incredulously.

She nodded. “Oh yeah.”

Well, I took that book and struggled with it for almost six weeks, but it was the very first book I ever read cover to cover. One day, the librarian met me in the hall and asked me if I was done with the book. “Normally you get a library fine after two weeks,” she said. “You’ve had that book almost a month and a half”

“But I’m not done yet,” I said.

“How many pages do you have left?” she asked.

“I’ve read it nine times, and I want to read it one more time,” I said.

“You’ve read it nine times?” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, is that all right?” I asked.

She grinned. “Yes, that’s alright. I’ll tell you what, why don’t you keep it three more days, and you read it one more time. Okay.”

“Okay,” I said. But I have to admit I was a bit of a juvenile delinquent. I kept it three more days, but I read it TWO more times.

After reading Jonathan Livingston Seagull, I used to go out to the lake near our home, stand for hours on the shore, and stare at the cliffs on the other side. I imagined myself as Jonathan Livingston Seagull. I wanted so badly to be special, and I would wonder out loud, “Can dumb Ben Mikaelson ever be special too?” I doubted that could ever happen..

One day after getting beat up really badly at school, I went alone to the lake after school and sat down beside the water. I stared at the cliffs on the other side and cried. I was in seventh grade, more alone than I had ever felt in my life, and I didn’t know what to do. I was trying to be like everybody else, but

I was still being teased. And so that day I decided to be myself. I paddled a canoe across the lake over to the cliffs and I started diving off the cliffs, pretending I was Jonathan Livingston Seagull. At first, I could barely swim, and I simply jumped into the lake from the lowest cliff, five feet up. But I had seen on American television where people actually dived into water headfirst. And so, I tried to dive. At first I belly-flopped, but finally I went in headfirst.

Over the next two years, I must have dived three thousand times, always diving higher, arching my back more, and pointing my toes. By the time I started my ninth grade, I was making beautiful arched swan dives from over fifty feet.

My diving remained my own secret until one day when somebody must have seen me.

I don’t know who it was, but I came to school the next day and the bully came marching up to me. “I heard you dove off a 50 foot cliff!” he challenged.

“Yeah,” I said meekly.

“You’re crazy,” he said, and walked away. He didn’t call me dumb or beat me up. He simply said, “You’re crazy!”

I grinned. That was the nicest thing that any one had ever said to me.

And so, I continued doing the things that I wanted. Because of what the DC-3 pilot had told me, I kept taking flying lessons. I couldn’t solo the airplane until my sixteenth birthday, but I wanted to be ready for that day, and so I flew with the instructor every chance I could. But flying lessons were expensive, and I came from a very poor family. Many times in my family there was barely enough money for food and clothes. In fact, I never had my first brand new piece of new clothes all of my own, bought special for me, until I was in eleventh grade. I thought everyone got their clothes from the Salvation Army. I just thought the other kids got there first. And so, I started mowing lawns, shoveling sidewalks, and delivering newspapers.

It took me three weeks to come up with the twelve dollars it cost for one forty-five minute flying lesson. Then I’d ride my bicycle seven miles from Northfield, Minnesota out to Stanton, Minnesota to take my flying lessons because my parents said they couldn’t afford the gas. Besides, they thought that flying lessons were a waste of money.

But I didn’t care. I wanted to fly more than I wanted to breathe air, and every three weeks I would ride my bike to the airport, even in the middle of the winter, the ground frozen and covered with snow, I would bundle up like Charlie Brown and ride out to the airport.

There were bullies at the school who knew I rode my bicycle in the winter, and they would throw snowballs at me and shout, “Hey Dumb Mikaelson, where are you going?” Sometimes they would knock me off my bike.

They would laugh and shout, “What’s wrong Dumb Mikaelson, can’t you ride a bicycle?”

Nothing, however, could keep me from my flying lessons. Those bullies didn’t know I had a dream and was determined to make it come true. Many times since, I have wished those bullies could have stepped onto a time machine and traveled into the future and heard a phone conversation that took place thirty years later because a little boy on his bicycle was willing to follow his dreams. I was invited to co-pilot an aircraft, all expenses paid, on an expedition to the North Pole.

Did I accept the invitation?

Oh yeah!

And so, I kept following my dreams. And I kept reading and writing. I began reading other books by Richard Bach, like *Bridge Across Forever* and *Illusions*. And then one day I picked up a thin little book called *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. I didn’t know what it was about, but it was really thin, and for me that was good. That was when I first read poetry. I loved how the words rhymed and had rhythm. They made me feel feelings that a normal book didn’t. So, I began trying to write poetry, and to this day, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and *The Prophet* are two of my favorite books because of how they changed my life.

I had a few friends in high school, but not many. I lived every moment of my life to cliff dive, fly, and I began parachuting. By the time I graduated from high school, I was cliff-diving from higher than fifty feet, I had my pilot’s license, and I had won the Minnesota State Skydiving championships. By then, I had started to read more, and I loved to write but I still didn’t think of myself as a writer. How could somebody be a writer if they couldn’t even spell simple words and their handwriting looked like hen-scratch?



I took a year out of high school to travel with a parachute team and compete around the Minnesota area. Then I wanted to go to college. I would never have made it into college because my grades were too bad. In fact, on my SAT entrance exam, I scored at the 5th grade level on the English comprehension portion. But because my dad was now a radio engineer at Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, I was able to go

to Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota without meeting the entrance requirements. I was on probation the first year, however.

My first English assignment was to write a one-page short essay. I did the best job I could, but when I got the paper after being corrected, there were more red marks from the teacher correcting it than there were black marks from me writing it. It looked like a pizza. And then to make things worse, the professor called me down in front of the whole class and told me to wait in his office. I thought he was going to kick me out of college.

I was wrong. Instead of flunking me, he told me “Ben, you are an incredible writer.”

I stood there speechless. “Me, a writer?” I asked incredulously. “I can barely spell!”

He smiled and nodded. “I noticed that,” he said. “But I just finished reading three hundred essays, and yours was the only one that made me laugh and cry.”

You're a storyteller, Ben. And that's what writing is--it's storytelling!"

"Then why does my paper look like a pizza?" I asked.

"Okay, let's talk about that," he said. "Listen, what would happen to you if you were the world's fastest runner? Let's pretend you are going to the Olympics to try to win the gold medal but your leg is in a cast--what would happen?"

"I'd lose," I said, "because I have a cast on my leg."

He nodded. "That's right, Ben. You do have a cast on your life. You're one of the best writers I've ever had, but until you learn the mechanics of the English language, you're going to be one of the most frustrated people alive. You're going to know that you're a great writer but you can't communicate it because of a simple mechanical problem. So let's get the cast off your foot, but don't ever think you're not a writer. You're one of the best writers I've ever had."

That was the first time in my life that any human being on the planet earth had ever told me that I was a writer.

And so, the professor connected me with a tutor. Every day for my first year of college, I had to meet with a tutor for an hour to learn simple punctuation, spelling, and grammar. But, I got the cast off. Not completely. I still struggle with spelling and grammar, but I got the cast off enough so that now I can share my stories.

The stories I tell now, and the books that students read of mine, they aren't my tutors. They are mine! When I travel around the world now as a published author, the best student writers I've ever discovered aren't in the private schools in Houston, Texas, with bodyguards and limos waiting for them. The best writers are in the juvenile detention centers where the kids truly have stories to tell. Their mechanical skills are poor, but their stories are powerful and filled with feelings. This is something that students should always remember.

Write stories that have feelings. If you don't make the reader care, it doesn't matter if the words are spelled correctly.

One of the greatest lessons I think any student can learn in life is that their life is the greatest story they will ever tell. They aren't authors of simply stories on a piece of paper, but they are also the authors of their own lives. They can make reality of their lives. And I also feel strongly that our differences are what make each of us so special. When I was young, I hated being different but now I'm glad I'm different. The bullies that always thought they were so cool; they're all losers now. But by doing what I wanted in life and learning to believe in myself, life has become truly remarkable.

After spending two years in the military, competing at the national level in parachuting, I graduated from college and moved out to Montana. I had always loved the mountains after living in the Andes, and so I designed and built a log cabin and lived in a pup tent for six months while I built my cabin by hand in the Rocky Mountains on the Bozeman Pass outside of Bozeman.

I had also helped work with some bear studies in Northern Minnesota during college, and one day I got a phone call asking if I would be willing to raise a little cub that had been used in a research facility. If I couldn't take him, they would have to kill him. I agreed, and began raising my bear Buffy. I didn't have any special expertise. Even the books I read on bears didn't prepare me for raising one.

I do need to say this--people should never raise wild animals. They belong in the wild. But Buffy was a special circumstance. I've raised him for over twenty years now, and he is the most extraordinary creature I have ever met.

He weighed barely twenty pounds when he first came to my home. Now he weighs nearly seven hundred and fifty pounds. We are very close, and he trusts me so much that he has held out his paw and allowed me to cut open an abscessed toe with a razorblade, the whole while growling and biting on



his other paw. This is a lot of trust. I'm not sure my sisters trust me that much.

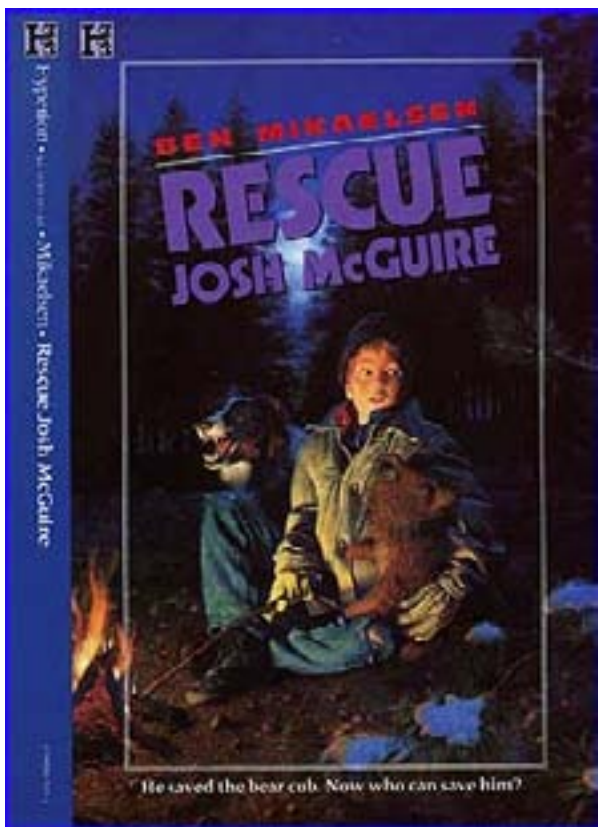
In Montana, they allow bears to be hunted in the springtime. Cubs will often wander away from their mothers for a couple of hours. Well, no hunter is going to see a bear and stand there for two hours to make sure the bear isn't a mother with cubs. And so many mothers are shot. And then when the cubs get hungry, they come back looking for their mother, find a gut pile, and begin to starve to death. It takes about a month for a cub to starve to death, and it is the most hideous thing that

I have ever seen. Some of the cubs are found by hikers and motorists, and are brought into the State Fish and Game Department.

At that time, the Fish and Game Department had no rehabilitation center, so some of the cubs were brought to me. After spending a bunch of time to save their lives, several of them went back to the Fish and Game Department, and they turned around and killed them because they didn't know what else to do.

This made me so mad that I wrote my very first published novel, *Rescue Josh McGuire*.





The book was a wonderful success, winning the International Reading Association award, the Western Writers of America Golden Spur Award, and many state reading medals. It was optioned for screen production, and my writing career was off to a start. I realized right away that to be a good writer, I had to make sure that I always wrote with emotion. The feelings I had when I found out the cubs were destroyed, those were the same feelings that made *Rescue* Josh McGuire a success. And so, I went in search of emotion, more than in search of any idea or plot.

Because I always felt lost between two cultures, I wrote my next book *Sparrow Hawk Red* about a young boy who ended up living among the homeless in Mexico. In one culture, he was a different color, and in the other culture, his skin was the only thing not different. This book was deeply autobiographical of my own life. The boy was also a pilot--guess where that idea came from.

By my third novel, I was starting to think maybe I was a writer. I had also discovered that if you are a writer, you can go anywhere and do anything you ever wanted, and if you write about it, it can be called research. And so, I wrote a story about a young girl who swims with dolphins. My novel *Stranded* started out to be simply that--a book about a girl saving the life of a short-finned pilot whale. But I sensed there was something more to the story. Why was my main character such a loner without friends? Why did she like being in the water all the time? Why did she like animals and risk her life to save one that was wounded? That was when I came up with the idea of having the main character, Coby Easten, get in an accident and lose her foot.

This was both good and bad. The good thing is an author can have anything they want happen in their story, and so the next night I chopped her foot off. The problem, however was that I didn't know a single thing about artificial feet or prosthetics. And so now, I had to go do more research. I met people who had lost their feet, and they started patiently teaching me what their world was like. I learned about phantom pain, about caring for a sore stump, about learning to walk on an artificial limb. And I learned in the writing of *Stranded* that a story will tell you where it wants to go and what should happen. But you have to be willing to listen and follow.

In fact, all research is that way. It's like a Pandora's Box sitting in front of you. You don't control what comes out of the box except for one brief moment when you decide if you want to open the latch or leave it closed. If you don't open the latch, it is called ignorance and you can walk away from the box and never know what was inside waiting for you. Ignorance IS bliss. But if you open the box, it is called education, and all the king's horses and all the king's men will never put humpty dumpty back together again.

And so it has been--if none of my books had ever been published, it would be okay, because the people who have touched my life and the things I've been able to see and do, have changed my life forever. A student will never be the same again if they go out, discover the world, and explore their feelings.

Two things I had always wanted to do were to go to Space Camp and to travel to Africa. And so, I started writing my fourth novel *Countdown*, the realistic story of who might be the first Junior Astronaut. I wasn't sure how I would tie Africa into the story, but I figured that I would figure that out if I just went and did my research. So, I went to the US Space and Rocket Center for a whole month. What a blast!

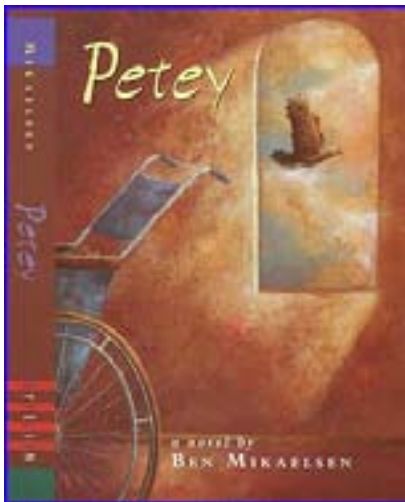
Then I was off to Africa. This was during the Somalian conflict and I was traveling in the northern part of Kenya near the Somalia border when some machine

gun fire kicked up the dirt in front of my Jeep. I turned and drove as fast as I could to southern Kenya. At the end of my month in a small Maasai village in the Naroke District of Kenya, I still did not know how I would tie the story of a young Maasai teenager to that of an American teenager in space, but I had to believe I would find a way. Each day I would go out with the herders. Because there was a drought taking place, each night we would help hold the cows up out in the corral. If they fell over, they would be too weak to stand again. And each day, an average meal was a fist-sized chunk of raw goat liver, a cup of intestine soup, and a cup of raw cow blood. The cow blood wasn't too bad because I was already used to it from Bolivia, but the intestine soup and raw goat liver took some getting used to.

One day when we came in from-herding, I had a big sliver in my foot and we went to the infirmary to have it removed. When I walked in the door, I found the Maasai doctor (or med-tech) sitting at a table in front of a short-waved radio, talking to someone in Australia. Standing behind him were seven or eight Maasai children, staring at the radio and wondering where the voice was coming from because surely a person couldn't fit into that little black box.

One kid was on the roof yelling, "There's nobody up here." One kid was down looking under the sub floor, yelling, "There's nobody down here. One kid was lying under the table and looking up behind the radio. "There aren't any feet sticking out," he said.

And then I remembered the SEREX short-waved radio program at Space Camp. Every shuttle has a short wave radio that can be used to communicate with someone on the ground for about ten minutes as they pass over. That was when I got the idea of the two youngsters communicating by radio and arguing over all the things that people have argued over for hundreds of years, from religion to culture to values and tradition. By following where the book took me, the novel became a book on tolerance, not just the story about the first Junior Astronaut.



I've had people often ask me which of my books is my favorite. I'd have to say Petey. It is not a better book, but it is my favorite because it is a true story. If you substitute myself for the character Trevor Ladd, the story is 90% true. Petey was a real person, raised in an insane asylum with another young boy, Calvin. Together they grew up as the only two children on an adult insane ward. Years later when he was released,

I did adopt Petey as my grandfather for the last twelve years of his life. He was the most extraordinary person I have ever met.

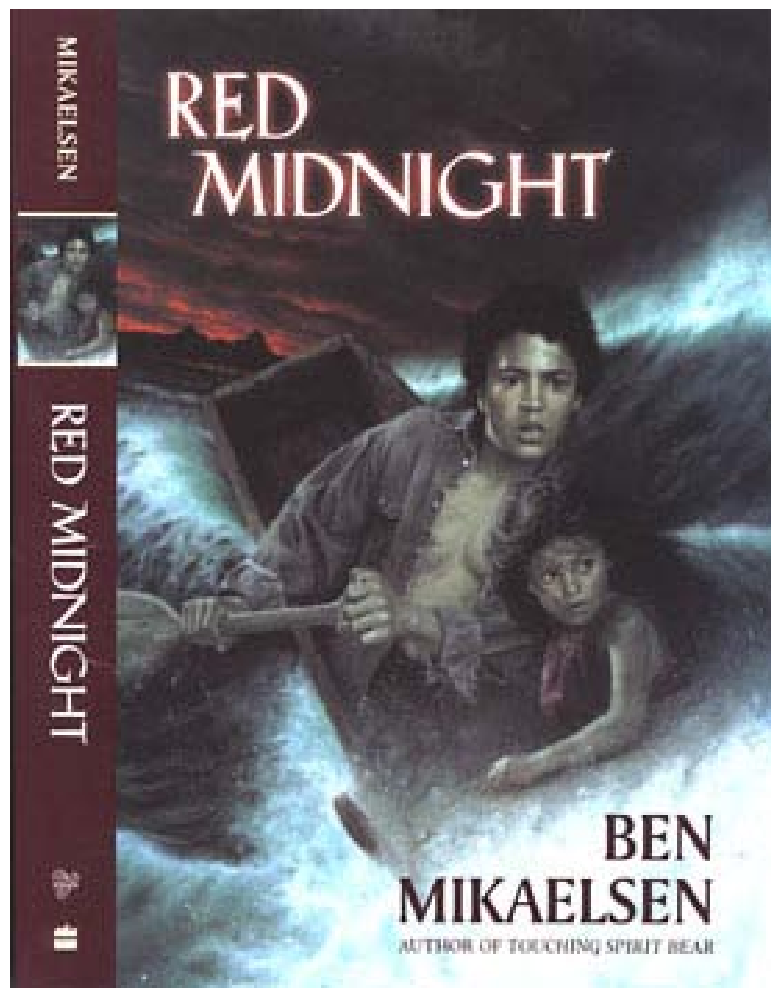
Petey was a difficult book to write emotionally, and after writing it, I wanted to write something easy. But that wasn't to be the case. I had grown up knowing about and seeing human rights abuses in Central and South America. I had also been down in the Florida Keys once when some Haitians came ashore as boat people. When I saw how some rich Americans treated them from a nearby hotel, I was so embarrassed to be an American.

And so, I decided to write *Red Midnight*, the story about a boy who escaped Guatemala after seeing the massacre of his village. He takes his uncle's sailing kayak and sails north along the Yucatan coast and across the Gulf of Mexico to Florida.

When I was doing the research for *Red Midnight*, I was in northern Guatemala interviewing nine women who had all seen the actual massacres of their villages when they were young. Two of the women, were still with the resistance movement, and so their interviews had to be held in a safe-house late at night. One woman-I can never say her name because she would be killed-started out her interview with me at midnight by saying, "I don't want you to ask me any questions. I want only to tell you my story."

I agreed, and she began by saying, "When I was young, I used to like to climb trees. My mother told me that when I climbed a tree, it took me closer to heaven. And I thought my mother was right. When I climbed high, higher than even the boys dared to climb, if I closed my eyes and reached my hand as far above my head as I could reach and spread my fingers, I thought I could feel the clouds."

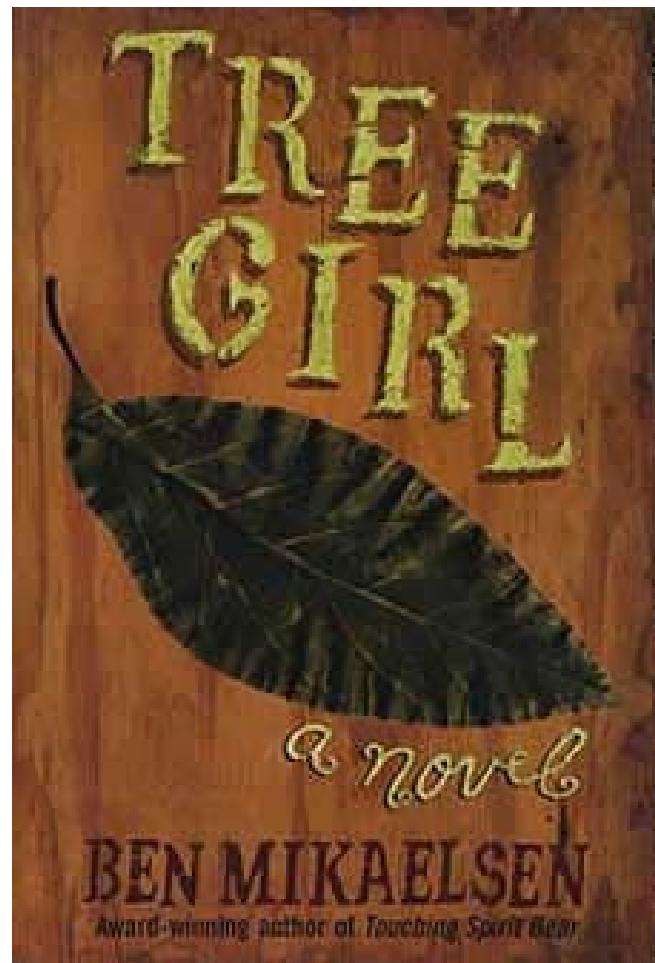
That was how she began her story. Then she went on to tell me how she was in a big Avocado tree one day when the soldiers came. Because of the thick foliage, she could peek out and see them, but they couldn't see her. During the next two days, she sat in the tree and watched the systematic



killing, torturing, raping, dismemberment and annihilation of every human being she had ever known. When the soldiers finally left, she climbed down, nearly dead, and began a several week journey, walking overland up into the Chiapas area of Mexico to a refugee camp.

At four o'clock in the morning, this woman finished her story. We had both cried all the tears we had to cry, and for the last hour, she had been speaking monotone, looking down at her lap in the candlelight. Finally, she looked up at me with crusted cheeks and eyes that looked like sunken pits, and she said, "That is my story. When I was young, I used to like to climb trees. My mother told me that when I climbed a tree it took me closer to heaven. But I know now that my mother was wrong. Climbing a tree only takes you closer to hell, and I have never climbed a tree again."

I knew three things when she finished her story that morning. First, this wasn't research for *Red Midnight*. This was its own story, the story that would one day become my novel *Tree Girl*. Secondly, I knew that the tree was the metaphor of life. We can avoid all the danger in life by not taking chances and climbing the trees in life, but if we do, we will never sit with the eagles and breathe the wind and see the mountains beyond. We must risk to gain. That is what makes each of us Tree Girls. Thirdly, I knew that the woman who sat before me was a defeated woman. She had endured much, but was now defeated. I knew that my character, Gabriella Flores, needed to climb the tree again. And from this knowing, came my eighth novel, *Tree Girl*, my first senior-high novel.



A boy asked me once how many more novels I would write in my lifetime. I asked him how many more breaths he would take. My point was, I don't know. I'm a writer. I don't know of too many writers who have retired because most of us write because it is our passion. If I had never had a novel published, I would still write because I am a writer. I will write until the day I die. I will admit to a secret dream, however. I would love to someday write a classic. I will never know if I succeed because I will be 100 years dead and in the grave. But if it is to happen, it won't come from writing ten, twenty, or thirty novels. It might happen if each time I write one of my novels, I continue to grow in my understanding of the human spirit and the human condition. Then, maybe, when I am an 85 year old, wizened old man, I will have enough understanding into the human condition to pen something that can last on the shelf next to such wonderful names like Seuss, London, and Kipling. That would be my secret dream if I were to share it with you.

And for now, I am simply thankful that life has given me the written word. I can't sing a note without scaring the dog. I can't paint a picture of a cow pie, much less a sunset. But I did discover words under the covers at night as a child. I discovered that words were more than just little black chunky things. If I put those little black chunky things in the right order, they allowed me to make magic. I could make people laugh and cry.

And I think back in my own life to three people. There was a pilot who took five minutes out of his day in a DC-3 to tell me that I should be a pilot. There was a librarian who took five minutes out of her day to listen to my problems and put the right book into my little hands. And there was a professor who could have flunked me my first year of college, but instead took five minutes to tell me I was a writer and encourage me to make it my vocation. A grand total of fifteen minutes by three very special people changed my life, and I would hope that in reading this autobiography, this time spent would encourage you to discover what you can do with your life.

The Chinese have a saying that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. A book doesn't change the world, but I do know that from reading Jonathan Livingston Seagull, my perspective in life changed one hundred and eighty degrees. Each discovery that Jonathan Livingston Seagull made, and each time he took a new risk, I also made that discovery in my mind and took that same risk. When Jonathan decided he should leave the flock, I asked myself what would happen to me if I also left the flock and found my own life. And by the time I finished reading that book, I had hope that I too could become a magnificent creature if I believed in myself.

Because of one book, my journey of a thousand miles left me thousands of miles from where I would have been had I not read a book. That is what is so wonderful about reading and writing. We can discover our own potential. Students can discover the same lessons that I learned--they are authors also, not just of words on some written page, but of reality. We are all the authors of our lives.

