A conversation with author

Christina Uss

Christina Uss talks about her quirky and charming debut middle grade novel, *The Adventures of a Girl Called Bicycle*.

★ “An extraordinary pilgrimage featuring several fantastical characters and an unforgettable adventure to boot.”
—Shelf Awareness, starred review

★ “‘Pedal headfirst’ into this terrific adventure.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

★ “The story elegantly blends elements of mystery, adventure, and fantasy.”
—Publishers Weekly, starred review

A bit of mystery. A bit of magic. And lots of adventure! How did you come to write *The Adventures of a Girl Called Bicycle*?

I remember the exact moment Bicycle’s journey began. I’d worked for years as a freelance writer for magazines and newspapers covering bicycle travel stories. In my downtime, I read voraciously, including re-reading my favorite books from childhood, so my husband joked around one day about how I’d end up writing a children’s book. When I challenged him to tell me the title of this imaginary book, he announced, “It’ll be called ‘The Adventures of a Girl Called Bicycle.’” My eyes got wide and I jumped out of my chair and shouted, “Hold everything—I DO want to write that book! Why is she called Bicycle? What are her adventures? Wait, I think she rides her bike across the United States and goes through Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California. Excuse me.” I ran upstairs, opened a file on my computer, and started the story right then. I had an absolute ball coming up with Bicycle’s story.

You’ve biked across the United States twice! How have your experiences helped you write the details of Bicycle’s journey? Is anything in the book based on true events?

Bicycle’s journey has a lot in common with my first ride across the United States—in fact, she not coincidentally follows nearly the exact route that I took from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco when I was twenty-two. It’s crazy that I ever decided to take that ride, as I am part sloth and never displayed an abundance of physical stamina or bike-handling skills. However, while cooking spaghetti on my first evening in my graduate-student dorm, I overheard a fellow student say he had ridden his bike across the country the previous summer. A voice inside my head yelled, “CHRISTINA, YOU ARE GOING TO DO THAT!” and the voice was so certain, I didn’t question it. I joined a two-month-long, 4,000-mile fundraising ride that was by turns stunning, challenging, terrifying, confusing, gratitude-inducing, and electrifying. It inspired me to become an adventure-tour guide so I could help other people enjoy the beauty of the world from the seat of a bike.
When I wrote my book, I knew I wanted to weave truths about long-distance cycling through it as much as possible. Bicycle is quite a bit faster and much braver than I am, but she and I have both gotten chased by dogs, been blessed by tailwinds, come close to heat exhaustion in the desert, and eaten really great pie while out riding. We both have also met the Cookie Lady of Afton Mountain, Virginia, who seems like a fictional character, but is entirely real.

Also, Bicycle meets a lot of kind people in her travels who are willing to feed her, offer her a place to rest, and give her advice on persisting towards her goal. Happily, this has been true for me too. When I start pedaling in any direction, I always meet the kindest, most generous people.

**In The Adventures of a Girl Called Bicycle, Bicycle’s hero is Zbig Sienkiewicz—a famous Polish cyclist. Who was your hero growing up and who is it now?**

I idolized professional musicians growing up—anyone who had the talent and persistence to get control of an instrument and use it to share their music with the world blew my mind. Now I admire the Dalai Lama. His compassion and kindness for all beings, his ability to laugh at himself, his dedication to simple living all inspire me to try to be a better person.

**Bicycle cycled every moment she could while living at The Mostly Silent Monastery. Have you also always enjoyed your other favorite childhood hobbies?**

I liked exploring my town and visiting friends by bike as a kid, but I didn’t ride as much as Bicycle! I was famous in my family for being the quiet girl who would prefer sitting at home with a stack of books to any other possible choice. My other obsession was playing my bright-yellow Fender Stratocaster guitar and listening to everything ever recorded by rock guitar hero Steve Vai. ( Weirdly, all my guitar lessons were either in jazz or classical, not rock. I may have been one of a very small number of teen girls who could accompany anything from The Great American Songbook with smooth, jazzy chords on a banana-colored rock guitar.)

**What was your favorite book growing up?**

Norton Juster’s The Phantom Tollbooth. I was always wishing for a sequel like The Phantom Tollbooth 2: Tock and the Time Machine.

**You were an adventure tour-guide for many years, biking all over the American West and New England. What is your favorite biking trail?**

I have so many favorites, it’s hard to choose—maybe I can narrow it down. I loved visiting our National Parks by bicycle, especially Glacier, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Zion, and Bryce. And the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State, and the Three Sisters area in Oregon. The Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho are amazing. Ooh, the lighthouses of Maine and the windswept beaches of Nantucket are fabulous. Okay, I’m officially bad at narrowing it down. It might be easier to tell you the top-three items on my bucket list: I want to ride some of our country’s epic car-free trails, like the 237-mile-long Katy Trail in Missouri, the 109-mile-long George S. Mickelson Trail in South Dakota, and eventually the still-in-process 3,000-mile-long East Coast Greenway from Maine to Florida.

**What is the most important thing you hope young readers will take away from your book?**

I hope young readers will learn that the United States is wonderful and weird and full of surprises around every turn in the road, and that a traveler will always find kind people ready to help her on her way. I also hope readers will know that making friends doesn’t have to look or feel a certain way to be real, and that they are perfectly within their rights to wait until they’re good and ready to make the friends they want to make the way they want to make them.

**If there is one thing you could tell your readers about life, what would you say?**

You don’t have to feel alone if you don’t want to. The world is full of friends you just haven’t met yet.

---

**About the Author**

CHRISTINA USS has written about bicycling and travel for magazines and newspapers. *The Adventures of a Girl Called Bicycle*, her first novel, was inspired in part by her own experiences while biking across the United States, once widthwise and once lengthwise. She lives with her twins in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts. Visit her online at christinauss.com.