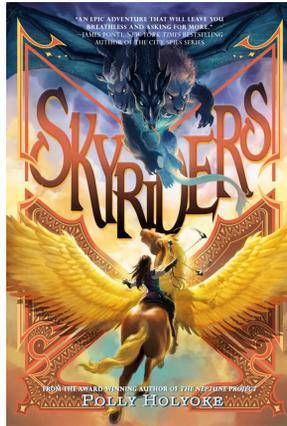


Writing *Skyriders*

An Interview with Author Polly Holyoke



What was your seed idea for *Skyriders*? In another interview you mentioned being fascinated with flying horses and the Pegasus Myth. Is that where the story began? How did you grow that idea into an exciting world of sky couriers and skysteeds whose lives are upturned by the reemergence of three-headed monsters who were defeated three hundred years earlier?

I've always been fascinated by the Pegasus Myth, in part because when I was little, my parents gave me a picture book of Nathaniel Hawthorn's re-telling of the myth which included gorgeous illustrations of Pegasus. Bellerophon tamed this fierce winged horse, and the two went on to slay the chimera, a terrible three-headed monster laying waste to Lycea. I've also been intrigued by the American Pony Express. During the short time it was in operation, brave young riders raced across the West to deliver the mail and connect the far reaches of our huge country. The two ideas came together in my mind, and I imagined a brave young courier on a flying horse delivering the mail across a vast empire. But then the dreaded chimerae return, and my heroine Kiesandra Torsun is one of the very few who knows effective ways to fight these monsters. But will people in power believe her?

During the course of the story, the protagonist Kiesandra Torsun battles self-doubt, prejudices and the monstrous chimerae. What do you think is her most admirable quality?

I admire Kie's courage and her persistence. Traveling to the capital and trying to convince influential, important people there that they need to listen to her is the hardest challenge shy Kie could face—even harder than fighting the voracious chimerae themselves. But she does persist, with the help and support of her loyal skysteed N'Rah and the new friends she makes in Pedarth.

The skysteeds in *Skyriders* each have their own particular traits and personality. How have your experiences with horses influenced your depiction of them? Do you have a favorite skysteed in the story, and if so, why?

I was definitely mad about horses as a girl. I read every horse book in my school library (and there were a bunch!) and I worked and saved up money until, with help from my parents, I could buy a horse of my own in seventh grade. N'Rah is definitely my favorite skysteed in

Skyriders. He looks a little like my sweet chestnut mare Highland Lark, but I based his personality more on Chico, a BLM mustang I ride sometimes at a friend's ranch. Chico always seems to be in a good mood, he's curious, and he has a sly sense of humor. I also like N'Talley, the Dowager Empress' skysteed. N'Talley reminds me of some of the wise, straight-talking older women I've known in my life.

What guided you in naming the characters in *Skyriders*? Why did you decide to put an N' at the start of each skysteed's name?

Originally, I wanted to make the skysteeds' names sound like noises that horses produce. They do snort, whicker, nicker, and neigh. N'Rah was the first skysteed I named, and N'Rah very much sounds like the kind of rumbling nicker horses give in greeting to each other. I quickly realized, though, that I would confuse young readers if all my skysteeds' names looked too much like each other on the page. So, then I decided to keep the N' but use some consonants that horses can't produce, like "s" and "t". I'm afraid N'Talley and N'Seela are definitely not names a skysteed could pronounce!

Your award-winning series *The Neptune Project* is dystopian fiction whereas *Skyriders* is an epic fantasy. Both require extensive world building. Was the process of writing these two series similar in some ways? How was your approach to *Skyriders* different?

I love these questions! I had to spend months researching *The Neptune Project*, which is the story of genetically engineered kids struggling to survive in the sea because climate change is ravaging the planet. To make that story as believable as possible, I had to talk to doctors and science teachers about genetics and the changes in human anatomy necessary to create kids who could survive in the ocean. Then I also had to do tons of marine research to make sure I depicted the world beneath the waves as accurately as possible.

For *Skyriders* I had to spend more time imagining the politics and history of Prekalt, and the original voluntary binding magic that made it possible for skysteeds and humans to communicate. The mad mage Yagarth who created the chimerae used a terrible involuntary binding magic to force sand dragons, lions and desert goats into single body, and that produced angry and dangerous monsters. Then I had to figure out how skyriders and their skysteeds could actually fight chimerae effectively. I discovered botans in my research (Topar's favorite weapon), and I thought up triwires, which Brandon Dorman illustrates in wonderful detail on the cover of the first *Skyriders* book.



What was your favorite scene to write? Why?

I loved the exciting original opening scene I wrote for *Skyriders*, in which N’Rah and Kie fly through a fierce mountain thunderstorm on their courier route. I grew up hiking and camping in Colorado, and storms in the high country can be violent and very loud as the thunder rolls and echoes off rocky peaks. I’ve also flown in small planes through the Rockies, so I know the gut-wrenching sensation of encountering sudden up and down drafts. I almost felt like I was flying with N’Rah through that storm as I wrote that scene! We ended up having to cut most of it, but I was happy when I had a chance to use it in the opening chapter of *The Sky King*.

Without giving too much away, what can readers expect from *The Sky King*, the sequel to *Skyriders*?

At the start of Book Two we discover that Prekalt desperately needs the help of wild skysteeds to fight the chimerae when they invade again, but will Kie and Prince Shayn be able to convince a reluctant Sky King to let his herds help in the great battle to come? Origin stories are a hot commodity these days in Hollywood, so I like to say *The Sky King* explains the origin story of skysteeds and their Great Alliance with humans. We also learn about N’Rah’s own origins as a wild skysteed and how he came to bind with his beloved skyrider Kie.

Interviewed by Author Laney Nielson, M. Ed.