

## Synopsis-Azor of Marblehead

A young woman with a husband and a small child moves during World War II to Marblehead, a peculiar New England seacoast town where she finds winding streets, ancient houses and a whole castfull of interesting inhabitants. With bountiful imagination and the hard training of a New York reporter, she crafts a young boy Azor Peach who asks logical questions and has the preternatural ability to converse with animals. She brings him to life in five successful children's books that together sell 45,000 copies between 1948 and 1963. How did she get it done?

My mother, Maude Crowley, came from Brooklyn, received a superb education at Adelphi and Columbia University, and worked as a reporter and feature writer before her marriage to my father, a Boston newspaper editor. Within a week of our arrival in town, she was filling notebooks with story ideas, inspired by the nicknames of residents like Anchor Float Dixey, the Codfish Dolibers, and Icetongs. Unique Marblehead greetings such as "Whurr," "Whip" and "Down Bucket," were recorded right away for later use.

The name Azor came from a young man Azor Orne Goodwin, the son of a neighbor, who was killed in the D-Day invasion. The fictional Azor's capacity to question the verities put forth by adults was based on me, Maude's son, while his ability to exchange useful information with animals came strictly from my mother's bountiful imagination and from her deep respect for lower creatures and their roles in our lives. Other characters like "Mule" Stoap, an old man with the endearing and maddening attributes of Marbleheaders like Anchor Float and Ice Tongs sprang just as easily from her capacious mind.

Her early success came from the unique appeal of her Marblehead stories and her brother-in-law Joseph Mitchell of *The New Yorker* who connected her with a good agent. She wrote the first Azor book in three weeks but even with Mitchell's help it took three years to appear in print.

The six-year-old Azor navigates school, a hectoring older brother, and the ridicule that his claim of speaking with animals inevitably brings. Undeterred, he gains credit when he locates a neighbor's lost earring based on a tip from Larry the cat and, at the end, emerge the hero after a seagull tells him the whereabouts of Pringle, a lost three-year-old child.

## Synopsis-Azor of Marblehead

In the next book, Azor negotiates his own rescue from loss at sea with his pet haddock who wants nothing more than his freedom. The dialogue with the fish could have come from Groucho Marx, one of my mothers' favorites.

In his third adventure, Azor befriends a pesky cow, with blue eyes, who causes all sorts of trouble to the point where the selectmen declare her a public nuisance. But Azor has concocted a logic-tight test for the existence of Santa Claus. Clara the cow comes through at the end to prove the reality of Santa to all doubters.

The fourth book introduces Tor, an orphaned Norwegian boy who is deeply moral and yearns for his homeland and his beloved uncle Hans. With help from Azor, he navigates the unfamiliar customs of American boys and outwits a troublesome lad named "Badnews" Brown. At the end Tor is rewarded when his uncle Hans appears in Marblehead on Christmas Eve with plans to stay.

The final published book features Pringle, the child whose rescue in the first *Azor* book depended on a tip from a seagull. Now, five years later, she adopts as a pet a goat with an unusual lavender coat. Like Azor's Clara the cow, Edna the goat is friendly but troublesome, and she too faces opposition from the town fathers. With persistence and good luck, Pringle gets to keep her pet after the animals's frantic bleating awakens a mean old lady just in time to escape from her burning house.

After the last book was published in 1960, my mother worked for several years on a sixth Azor book which expanded the adventures of "Badnews" Brown, the unsympathetic character from the Tor story. Badnews, it seemed, had good intentions in spite of his unpleasant exterior. He had great curiosity and believed that he could fix just about anything. He labored to relieve his parent's poverty with schemes that were too preposterous to work, and in the end barely avoided killing himself. After the publisher rejected the Badnews Brown manuscript, Maude turned to other projects.

Her first plan was to write a biography of Edward Brooks of Massachusetts, the first African-American elected in 1966 to the US Senate. The circumstances under which Brooks met his Italian wife during World War II intrigued my mother and presented an unusual angle which might distinguish her book from other biographies of African-American leaders. After a short period of research, she learned that other biographies of Brooks were well under way.

## Synopsis-Azor of Marblehead

The sweeping changes of the 1960s brought to town a talented and interesting cohort of people who gathered at the Kings Rook, Marblehead's popular coffee house. There she encountered an articulate young man who had experimented with every psychedelic and addictive drug then in existence, and managed, nonetheless, to function as a responsible adult. Intending to write a biography, she befriended him and his companions and spent the better part of two years recording and transcribing interviews. But her agent cautioned that with all the drug books then in the works, the competition would be too stiff for hers to succeed. Close to seventy she left off ambitious writing projects and devoted herself to family and to her numerous friends.

She made two trips to visit her relatives in Norway and Denmark where she delved into family history and wrote extensive letters detailing what she had found. In Marblehead she led adult classes in the Norwegian language and in writing.

My father's declining health, with blindness and dementia, consumed all her energy from 1976 until his death a decade later. In her remaining fourteen years, she read the newest and best writers as she always had, cultivated new friendships, and maintained a vigorous correspondence with her cousins and nieces. Her mental faculties were intact when she died from heart disease in 2000 at age 93.