



Photo © Brian Bowen Smith

A CONVERSATION WITH BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# JULIANNE MOORE

AUTHOR OF

## *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*

ILLUSTRATED BY MEILO SO

### What inspired you to write *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*?

My mother immigrated to the United States from Scotland in 1950, when she was ten years old. Upon entry to the States, she was asked if she would like to become a citizen, and she said no, she fully expected to return home to Scotland someday. She was married very young to my father (an American boy she met in high school in New Jersey) and I was born when she was 20. She eventually became an U.S. citizen when she was 27 when my father was applying for jobs that required she not be a foreign national. I remember her coming home crying because they made her renounce her British citizenship. She was also holding a small American flag!

So I grew up with a very young mother who had a strong sense of herself as belonging to another culture, and who also communicated to her children that we were a part of that culture too. It was obvious in small ways, like her coloring and her accent, but also profoundly, in the way she viewed her world. It was something I noticed intermittently when I was a child—when my friends would ask why my mother “talked funny” or why I had a kilt—but to me, everything about my mother was completely normal and familiar to me, even her own sense of being foreign. She was, simply, my mother, the mother that I wanted, the one that did everything for me and that I loved more than I can articulate.

This book, of course, is for her.

### What do you hope people take away from their reading of your new picture book?

I hope they recognize their own families, their own mothers and grandmothers, and that it gives them pleasure! Also, this is not an unusual story—so many of us in the United States, or many other countries, for that matter, have a parent or parents who emigrated. And I do feel that as a country we have become more and more about inclusion of culture, rather than simply assimilation, so it gives kids (and educators hopefully) a platform to talk about it.

### Were you an avid reader as a child? What's your first reading memory?

I loved to read as a child. We moved a lot and reading was something I could always take with me. The first sentence I ever read was in a kid's science book that I read with my mother, and the sentence was: “Mother, Mother,” said Bob, “I see a robin.”

### What writers have influenced you?

In terms of children's books, I love William Steig, Mo Willems, Kevin Henke, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Louisa May Alcott, books that don't condescend to the child and acknowledge their sense of humor. There really are so many great writers—Maurice Sendak, Theodore Geisel, Margaret Wise Brown, and on and on and on...

### *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me* is your fourth picture book. What have you enjoyed most about being a published author?

Oh my gosh, I am a huge lover of literature and books have always played a central role in my life. So the opportunity to participate in a world that holds so much meaning for me has just been tremendous. I love going to bookstores and schools and reading to kids, I love talking to readers about what they connected to in my stories, and I particularly love it when I feel that a story has resonated for children.



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**What is your favorite childhood memory of your mom? (If you can pick just one.)**  
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Picking one memory is impossible, especially now that she is gone. I am flooded with thoughts and memories of my mother daily—and I have so many of her mannerisms and habits. One habit she had was humming while she was working around the house—I didn't know that I did it too until my husband pointed it out. And I have very clear memories of her so very patiently teaching me to read, and teaching me how to tell time, while we folded sheets.

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**What is a favorite mom memory you have of each of your own kids? (If you can pick just one.)**  
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Now that they are bigger (15 and 11) I remember very distinct things about them as babies—my son's habit of saying "oh oh oh mommy" and my daughter's very hearty baby laugh and her insistence on walking next to the stroller, rather than in it.

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**What drew you to Meilo So's art for this book?**  
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I was so struck by the quality of Meilo's people in her art work—she works with water color, in a very impressionistic way — but the people seemed very distinct to me, and very real. I wanted to feel the character of the moms, their ethnicity, and their physicality, their emotion, and for them to look like all the moms that I had known and continue to know, in life. And Meilo's art captures all of those aspects so beautifully. The crazy coincidence is that she is also a foreign mom, and lives in Scotland, where my Mom was from!

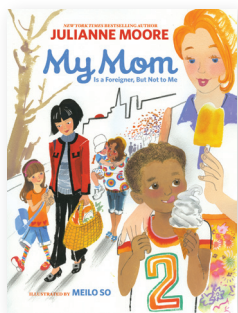
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**You've mentioned before that story has always been a big part of your life—from reading books to feeling like you are inside the story when you're acting. Given how important it is to you, what makes a good story for you?**  
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Well, I truly believe that the best story is one in which you recognize your life, or your self. I think probably all of us have had the experience as children of reading a book and thinking "How did that writer know about ME?" The most universal feelings are always the most intensely personal. And those feelings and observations are what makes a great story.

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**You're active in children's and literacy organizations, what do you see as being a needed focus to help improve literacy and engage children in reading and writing? What have been some of your most rewarding experiences working with kids?**  
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Well—exposure. Books. Time. Early childhood education. Reading out loud to children consistently. All of the things that many of the more affluent take for granted because we have the luxury of money and education. We do not have an adequate public education system in our country—the groups that I have worked with—Save the Children US programs, Children's Health Fund, Reach Out and Read—all provide books and reading programs to children in need.

And working with kids is always rewarding—kids are always appreciative and excited when they are read to. It is such an easy thing to do, and has such a tremendous pay off.



**MY MOM IS A FOREIGNER, BUT NOT TO ME**

by Julianne Moore, illustrated by Meilo So

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