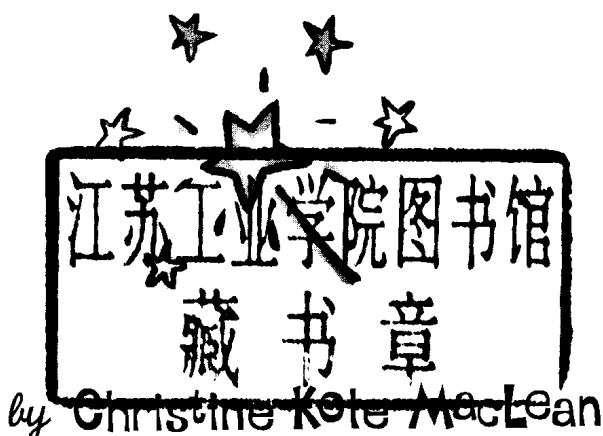


# Mary Margaret, *Center Stage*



Christine  
Kole MacLean

# Mary Margaret Center Stage



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## DUTTON CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A division of Penguin Young Readers Group

Published by the Penguin Group • Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa • Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

MacLean, Christine Kole.

Mary Margaret, center stage / by Christine Kole MacLean. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Mary Margaret is hoping to be Cinderella in the community play but must face the fact that the lead will be played by Ellie, the new girl in class who seems to do everything right.

ISBN 0-525-47597-4 (hardcover)

[1. Self-perception—Fiction. 2. Interpersonal relations—Fiction.

3. Theater—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.M22423Marc 2006

[Fic]—dc22

2005009093

Published in the United States by Dutton Children's Books,  
a division of Penguin Young Readers Group  
345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014  
[www.penguin.com/youngreaders](http://www.penguin.com/youngreaders)

Designed by Irene Vandervoort

Printed in USA      First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Steph Owens Lurie—Cheers!*

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to those who helped shape this book in ways large and small: Michelle Bombe, Lois Maassen, Jodi Zenk and the entire cast and crew of the Holland Civic Theatre's 2004 production of *The Spell of Sleeping Beauty*, Danielle ("Veruca Salt") Schmidt, Bill Bryson, Sharon Dwyer, and (as always) Clark MacLean and Madeline MacLean.

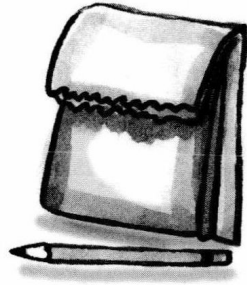
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*Center Stage*



## 1. *My Perfectly Awful Day*



**P**eople! People! Listen up!" Mr. Mooney says. Out of the corner of my eye I see that he's waving hand-outs over his head, but the rest of my eye I'm keeping on Ellie. She is the team leader for her group. I am the team leader for my group. There are four other team leaders, too, but I don't care about them. I only care about me and Ellie, my team and her team—especially about my team beating her team. Ellie is sitting all quiet, looking up at Mr. Mooney like she's a trained dog waiting for her owner to give the next command. I squinch my eyes at her. Roll over! I think. Sit! Stay!

"Mary Margaret, what are we supposed to be doing?" Kyle says. I know it's Kyle without even looking at him, because he always talks like he has a cold. "Sit!" I hiss, still looking at Ellie. "Stay!"

Kyle sits.

"This is a quiz about following instructions and working as a team," Mr. Mooney says, handing out the sheets and a brown paper bag at each table. "Do *not* open the



bag. Team leaders for the week—you're responsible for helping your team do the best possible job." When Mr. Mooney gets to our table, he puts both his hands on my desk and leans over me. "This is not a contest. This is not about who gets done first." He says it loud like he is telling the whole class, but he is looking right into my eyes.

Mr. Mooney is pretty smart. He's the one who told us that it's better to be last through the lunch line than first, because the lunch ladies will give the last class leftover cookies, if you make sad eyes at them and ask very sweetly. And he knows that when the computer isn't working right, it's because it got up on the wrong side of bed, and if you give it another chance by turning it off and then on again, lots of times it will get up on the *right* side of bed. Best of all, on the first day of school, before I even had a chance to tell him, he knew that I had just had a birthday. So he's right about a lot of things. But he's wrong about the quiz not being a contest. For a girl like me who has a girl like Ellie sitting two groups away, *everything* is a contest.

Mr. Mooney is still looking at me. I smile to show him that I am listening. He moves on to the next group. Because Mr. Mooney stopped at Ellie's group first, my group is already behind. I snatch up the piece of paper and begin reading. I am reading so hard that when he says, "Take your time. The first instruction is to read all the instructions carefully," his voice sounds far away, like my mother's when we're at the beach and she calls to me and I almost don't hear her because of the waves and the wind.

*1. Read all the instructions.*

Okay, that's easy enough. I look around. Everyone is still reading.

*2. Using a number-two pencil, write out the first names of everyone in your group in alphabetical order.*

By now I can hear Collin's group arguing about what number the lead in his mechanical pencil is, so I know they have already started doing the things on the sheet. I scoot up to the edge of my seat. Sitting on the edge of my seat is sort of like a shortcut to working good and fast.

*3. Choose one person from your group to be the listener. Give that person a piece of paper and a pencil and have her turn her back to the rest of the team. The other team members may look to see what's in the bag. Now, without naming the object, tell the person how to draw it, step by step.*

By now, almost all the groups have begun working, and we are even further behind. I am too antsy to read any more. "Let's just start," I say.

"It says to read all the instructions," says Brett, looking over at Ellie's group.

"But everyone is getting ahead of us!" I say.

McKenzie crosses her arms over her chest. "You're supposed to be the leader, Mary Margaret, remember? And leaders help people *always* do the right thing. That's what Mr. Mooney says." Brett nods. Kyle just sits. I clamp my teeth together and decide I'll just have to read faster.

4. *Arrange the people in your group from tallest to shortest. Go to step 5.*
5. *Tie your right leg to the left leg of the person standing next to you, using the yarn in the bag. Use the yarn colors in the order that they appear in a rainbow and*

"Forget it!" I say, slapping the instructions down and grabbing a pencil. "Alphabetical order for our group is . . ." I look around. "Brett, Kyle . . ."

"But you haven't read all the way through," says McKenzie. "And leaders *always*—"

"Win," I say.

Brett frowns. "I don't think Mr. Mooney ever said that."

"Let's take a vote," says McKenzie.

This is not going so good. I can hear a paper bag crinkle somewhere near where Ellie's group is sitting, so at least one group is already on step three. If we don't start right now, we'll never catch up. It may already be too late! "Kyle," I say, "do you want to be a loser?" Kyle doesn't say anything. "Speak!" I say.

He points his nose up to the ceiling like a dog howling at the moon. "I don't want to be a loser," he says.

I look at Brett. Just then his stomach growls, which gives me an idea. "I'll give you my bag of chips at lunch," I say.

He shrugs. "Okay."

The vote is three to one. Right away McKenzie slows

us down on step two by arguing that *McKenzie* comes before *Mary Margaret* in the alphabet. She's doing it on purpose because she's mad that she lost the vote. All she wants is to get her own way. She wouldn't make a good leader because leaders are supposed to think about everyone and not just themselves.

Kyle is good at following directions (he's still sitting), so we decide he'll be the one to do the drawing on the third step. He turns his back, and the rest of us jump up and peek inside the bag. We get lucky this time. It's just a square, so telling him how to draw it will be easy.

"Draw four lines," Brett says. Kyle draws four lines all different lengths and all bunched together, like he's drawing the legs of a cat.

"No!" we all shout at the same time.

"Draw two lines the same size a little way apart," I say. Kyle does. "Now draw two more lines that connect everything." Kyle does.

"Oh!" he says, all glad. "We had an M in our bag!"

"You're not doing it right," I say. "You have to listen!" Behind us, I hear some kids fighting about whether the colors of the rainbow are ROY G. BIV or ROY B. GIV, which means they are already on step four. The only good news about that is that it's not Ellie's group.

Kyle stamps his foot. "I did just what you said," he says. "You're not telling me right!"

McKenzie elbows me out of the way so she's next to Kyle. "I'll do it," she says.

I don't know why she thinks she can when she didn't even know that *Mary Margaret* comes before *McKenzie* in the alphabet. "What makes you think you're so smart?" I ask.

She taps her head. "Because I've been using this, that's why," she says, like she *invented* thinking. "Kyle, do it again. This time draw two lines up and down a little ways apart." She watches Kyle as he draws and then yells, "The same length! Make them the same length." Kyle does. "Now draw a line that connects the top of those two lines . . ." She waits for him to catch up. "And a line that connects the bottom of those two lines.

"There," McKenzie says, all proud of herself.

"It's a rectangle," I say. "You didn't tell him that all four lines need to be the same length." Finally, Kyle draws it right.

"All that for a dumb square?" he asks.

I'm already pulling the yarn out of our bag for step four. When I look up to see who is taller, McKenzie or Brett, I see that Ellie's group is just sitting there, watching everyone else in the class. It looks to me like they haven't even started yet, and this fills me up with happiness. "Quick! Line up shortest to tallest," I say, thinking *Roy G. Biv, Roy G. Biv*, and laying the yarn out: Red! Orange! Yellow! Green! Got it! We do that step fast.

For the sixth thing, we're supposed to march backwards to the principal's office singing, "Heigh-ho, heigh-

ho, it's off to work we go." That's a little weird, but that's what step six says, and it's a test on following directions, so we do it. By now, we are way ahead of everyone else, and there's only one step left before we win. Ellie is still just sitting there watching everyone. Eat my dust, I think. My brother JT says he thinks that every time he pulls ahead of another runner during a race.

We have to turn the page over to read the last step. When I read it, my mouth flops open. The last step can't be right! I read it again. And again, because my dad always says the third time is the charm. Too bad that this time it isn't. Because the last direction is

*6. Ignore all the other directions before this one. Sit quietly at your tables until Mr. Mooney says the test is over.*

I stare up at Mr. Mooney, who is raining down his "good job" smile on Ellie's table. It is my very favorite Mr. Mooney smile—except for when he beams it on Ellie, like he is doing now. Like he did when she passed level 15 in math, while everyone else was still on level 13. And like he did last week after the fall spelling bee, when Ellie beat me on *occasionally*. Someone must have changed the spelling of that dumb word since I learned it last year, because suddenly it had only one *s*. So far she is better than me at math, spelling, reading, and social studies. And now this.

Now she's even better than me at following directions.

For the bazillionth time since Ellie moved here and joined our class, it's me who is eating Ellie's dust. And it doesn't taste that good.

"So you don't like the new girl?" Andy asks me on the bus ride home. I have been trying to tell him how Ellie is ruining school for me. Andy is my best friend from summer vacation. I got to know him through his dog, Itzy, who is named for some famous violin player. We aren't in the same class, but we sit together on the bus and compare the best and worst things that happened at school.

I think about whether or not I like Ellie while I give Stevie Butts a cookie from my lunch. I always give him a cookie from my lunch because I feel sorry for him. Nobody ever calls him Stevie. It's always Stevie Butts. Out on the playground, kids will yell, "Stevie Butts, you get back here!" and "It's Stevie Butts's turn on the climbing wall." I'd like to give him a new last name, but I can't. So I give him a cookie.

"A sugar cookie today?" he says. "I love sugar. Thanks, Mary Margaret!"

"You're welcome, Stevie Butts," I say, out of habit. I turn around in my seat and say to Andy, "I don't like Ellie, but I don't *not* like her, either."

Andy flaps the end of his tie like it's a wing. He has this thing about ties, which is that he wears them all the

time and he plays with them when he's thinking. The one he's wearing today has fat blue stripes and narrow yellow ones. "Is she mean?"

"No."

"A snob?" he asks, flapping harder.

"No."

"Then what?"

"Well," I say, "she's smart."

He stops flapping because he thinks he gets what I'm saying. "Oh, and she rubs it in?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what?"

I scrunch down in the seat and put my knees up on the seat in front of me. Because it's hot out and I'm wearing shorts, it's pretty easy to get my knees to stick there. If the weather isn't just right, they slide off. "I don't know. Yesterday she bumped me in the lunch line. I almost dropped my milk."

Andy shrugs. "Everybody gets bumped in the lunch line."

"She's just always in my way, KWIM?" That is code for "know what I mean."

"Not really," Andy says. "It sounds to me like there's nothing wrong with her."

"That's what's wrong with her," I grumble. "She's perfect."

"Why should you care?" Andy asks.



The only thing about Andy is that sometimes he forgets whose side he's on. "I don't," I say, picking at a scab on my knee. I bet perfect people don't even have scabs to pick, because they never fall down. The truth is that I don't care *much*. And I wouldn't care at all, if only Mr. Mooney would stop sunning his smile on Ellie.

In school we learned about the Sahara Desert and how it gets sunshine all day long, every day. That's about how much sunshine Ellie gets in our class. It wouldn't kill her to share a little.