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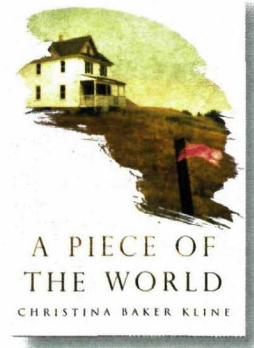
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AUTHOR PROFILE 1

# CHRISTINA'S WORLD

Following on from her two-million-selling historical novel *Orphan Train*, **CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE** has delved into the backstory of a famous painting by Andrew Wyeth to write her new novel, **A Piece of the World**. **ANGUS DALTON** talks with the author.



Visitors to New York's Museum of Modern Art often find themselves bewitched by Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. The 1948 portrait shows a young woman in a pink dress draped across a corner of a dry field. Her face is turned away from the viewer and she looks to a grey farmhouse jutting up from the horizon. Her legs are cast uselessly behind her, and her fingers claw at the grass. The woman in the painting was based on Christina Olson, the real-life neighbour of American artist Andrew Wyeth. Christina Baker Kline, who lives in New Jersey, is as fascinated by the people who flock around this painting as she is by the woman in the frame.

'The painting, in real life, is incredibly compelling,' says the English-born writer. 'It's fascinating to watch people experience it for the first time – they stand very close to it, gazing at that girl in the grass, examining the tiny brushstrokes. There is a mystery, a question, at its heart: why is she stranded at the bottom of the field? Is she fearful? Yearning? What does she desire?'

These questions formed the basis for Kline's new novel, **A Piece of the World**, which is narrated by a fictionalised version of the real-life woman who inspired Andrew Wyeth to paint *Christina's World*. The author's previous novel, *Orphan Train*, spent five weeks at the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list. But Kline says that this new novel is her most personal project to date.



'My grandmother and mother were also named Christina, and my grandmother, in South Carolina, grew up in circumstances not unlike Christina Olson's in Maine: they were both raised in the early 20th century in remote clapboard farmhouses, without heat or electricity or running water. Like Christina Olson, my grandmother as a child was afflicted with physical problems that limited her mobility. I've always been intrigued by the subject's seemingly paradoxical combination of strength and helplessness.'

Olson was posthumously diagnosed with Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, an inherited degenerative muscular condition that severely restricted her movement. She was bound to her home, but Olson had formidable resolve and a precocious wit; by the time she was 12, her schoolmaster asked her father if she might stay with the school and eventually take it over. Christina's father refused the offer, saying she was needed at their property.

'Life was hard on the farm,' says Kline. 'But she was fiercely proud and would not use a wheelchair. Nevertheless, she ran the household. In later years she took to dragging herself around – as we can see in Wyeth's portrait.'

Much of the novel centres on the relationship Andrew Wyeth – who was a nationally renowned artist by the age of 22 – and Olson, who would become his muse. Artistic brilliance ran in the family; Andrew's father, N C Wyeth, illustrated early editions of



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*Treasure Island* and helped to catapult the story to classic status.

‘On the surface, Andrew Wyeth was as different from Christina Olson as anyone could be,’ Christina admits. ‘But they shared surprising similarities that bonded them. Like Christina, Andrew was sickly as a child and walked with a limp. He was ornery and liked to be alone. He valued hard work and simple living. He appreciated Christina’s quiet strength, her smarts and her contrarian nature.’


As much as this book centres on these historical figures, it also focuses on the house in which they live. Kline, in the prologue to **A Piece of the World**, writes, ‘... the skeleton of a house can carry in its bones the marrow of all that came before.’ The feeling of a house oozing history through its walls is something Christina has experienced first hand.

‘I’ve lived in some very old houses. When I was born, my parents lived in a 13th-century stone house called Apple Trees in a small village in England, Swaffham Bulbeck. Eventually we moved to Tennessee, into an abandoned brick house called The Wayside that we were told came with a resident ghost, Rufus. I’ve always been fascinated with how houses contain layers of stories. The epigraph of my first novel is from Aeschylus: “The house itself, could it take voice, might speak aloud and plain.”’

When Kline is asked about how she created drama from the seemingly mundane and

housebound life of a disabled woman in the 1940s, she quotes Thomas Hardy: ‘The business of the poet and the novelist is to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things.’ Having grown up in Maine and having developed a deep respect for the real-life Christina Olson through research, Kline was committed to ‘getting into the head of that girl in the grass’. The result is a forceful, atmospheric novel that creaks with the depth and character. The book becomes especially compelling when some of the stories lurking under the floorboards begin to emerge.

‘The real-life Christina was descended from the chief magistrate of the Salem witch trials,’ says Kline. ‘Her ancestors, trying to escape the taint of association, fled Salem for the coast of Maine in the middle of winter. And Christina herself was rumoured, among some of the townspeople, to be a witch herself. Wyeth variously described her as “a witch” and “the queen of Maine”. I think she enjoyed, and flirted with, the association.’

People walk in and out of the house in **A Piece of the World** without forewarning; Christina Olson inherited her grandmother’s tendency to leave the doors open, should any passing witch need refuge. 

**A Piece of the World by Christina Baker Kline is published by HarperCollins, rrp \$29.99.**