

# Milbre Burch

## STORYTELLING AS AN ARTFORM

### **Milbre Burch:** The Tale Behind the Teller

By Brianne Sanchez  
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Internationally known storyteller Milbre Burch will be performing her one-woman show for adults, *Mom's the Word: A Journey in Meters and Centimeters*, at the Missouri Theatre on Saturday, May 21. The show is at 7 pm. Tickets cost \$10.

Milbre Burch is finally settling down. It's evident by the attention paid as she surveys the wooden fence in the process of its construction along the side yard of her spectacular white brick and green accented home. The funkified Williams Sonoma style is Milbre manifested - complete with backyard labyrinth, window lined idream office and a basketball hoop cemented into the circle drive.

For a woman who went to college on the East coast (two other universities before settling on her alma mater, Duke), has lived and worked with her journalist husband on the West coast, and hails originally from the South, her move to Columbia in July 2003 has become the end of the line. But while the fence boards are being nailed down, her career is still in full swing, sprouting new branches as quickly as the trees in her wooded backyard.

Milbre Burch is a professional storyteller. I grew up to be what I always was, she says. It would be simple to attribute her unique calling to the exposure to folk and fairy tales that she had at an early age, the family of readers and salesmen that she was born into and the drama and dance experience that she had growing up. For Milbre, storytelling is the crossroads of gesture and language, where [I am] most at home. The story she unravels about the events that led her to becoming a one-woman show is captivating. Her life is laced with chance meetings that produce a cast of characters who led Burch from pursuing political science and film to what she calls "a mime who got tired of the quiet."

While at Duke, Milbre rounded up a group of friends - the renowned modern dance teacher Meli Davis Kaye had told her she needed just five students to form a class. After graduation, Burch ended up working professionally for Meli's company. Later, Milbre became an artist-in-residence for the Beaufort County School System in S.C., where she learned "how to be a teaching artist and engage a community". Her next move was to Providence, R.I., where she fell into a closely-knit group of performers and founded the *Heart of Gold Vaudeville Company*. It was there that she realized she had become a storyteller and met her husband. From Rhode Island, Milbre volleyed between the coasts, fine tuning her craft.

There are no white gloves or clownish face paint when Milbre performs. She might bring a few props ñ her upcoming show at the Missouri Theatre Momís the Word: A Journey in Meters and Centimeters will feature a giant belly cast, a relic of her own journey in becoming a mother. The focus for her programs, which have ranged in theme from biomes and bugs to addressing racial harmony in the South, is movement and the story that she tells.

Fellow storyteller, Columbia resident and friend of 25 years, Beth Horner describes Milbre’s work as “very precise and done with great care - Even her gestures and movements are thought out ahead of time.” Horner recently worked with Burch on localizing the effort within the storytelling community to utilize the group’s performance talents and raise aid money for Tsunami victims. Their February program incorporated students at Columbia’s Independent School and initiated Milbre as a community member who is not afraid to get involved.

Before seeing her perform, Columbia residents may have heard or read Milbre’s work. Burch lends her soothing, expressive voice to stories that she produces on her own Kind Crone record label. Hardly a crone herself, today Milbre is clad in jeans and a bright shirt and earrings of the colors that evoke visions of the sun setting over an ocean. Kind Crone is “a name to grow into”, a name that lent itself to her from a Swedish folktale. Most of her books are anthologies of folktales, which she makes her own through her retelling.

Of her work, Horner said, “[Milbre] made Rapunzel into a beautifully written story that not only tells the original tale but brings in threads from other cultures and modern threads to make it pertinent today.”

Milbre’s mastery of the craft is recognized by her audiences, which range from preschool to prison, and by other professionals in the storytelling community. One of Burch’s most rewarding projects resulted from an article that had been written by her husband, MU journalism professor Berkley Hudson, on the rebirth of the storytelling movement. It appeared in the Los Angeles Times, catching the attention of Larry Cotsen, a well-known benefactor of the arts. He was impressed by the article and provided the couple with a grant to create the storytelling project for his renowned Cotsen Children’s Library. The project required two years of interviewing to archive more than 200 hours of video from 90 storytellers. Milbre has visions of a future project that will similarly catalogue the birth stories of women.

A makeshift bulletin board of butcher paper takes up the wall behind her desk. It is divided into months, with neon Post-Its outlining where her storytelling engagements will have her traveling. Maine in July, Utah for August and in September to Rhode Island, where her storytelling career began. Come October, Milbre is headed to Jonesborough [check spelling of town], Tenn., as a “featured teller” at the 33rd National Storytelling Festival. She’ll be presenting a program entitled, Mid-career moves: Grace and Resilience in the Face of Relocation at the National Storytelling Conference in Oklahoma City this summer.

Milbre Burch is all at once both personal and professional. While she recounts the backroad route to her storytelling career, she's also arranging sleepovers and soccer games for her daughters, Elizabeth, 8, and Katey Blake, 13, and troubleshooting on the printer with her Journalism School advertising intern Courtney Suthoff. Just listening to her for an afternoon, you'll come to the same conclusion as friend Beth Horner, "If I were a story, I would want to be told by Milbre Burch."