

Mary Amato is an award-winning children's and YA book author, poet, playwright, and songwriter. Her books have been translated into foreign languages, optioned for television, produced onstage, and have won the children's choice awards in Ohio, Minnesota, Utah, and Arizona. She teaches popular workshops on writing and the creative process around the country. The first title in her new series, *Star Striker - Game On!* - arrives on bookshelves September 7th.

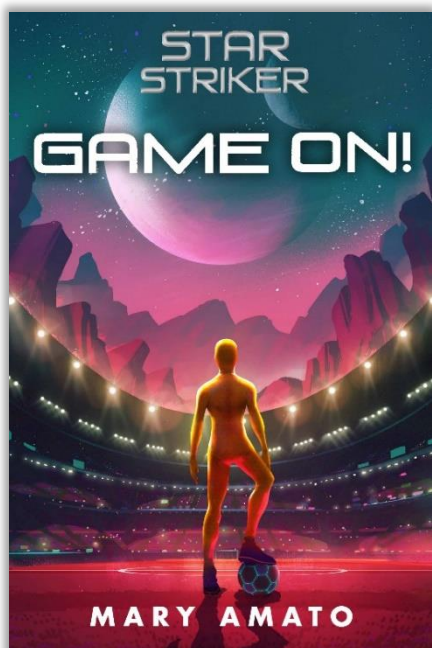


**Q. How did you come up with the incredible premise of the *Star Striker Series*—of aliens kidnapping an Earth kid named Albert to play on their interstellar soccer team?**

My two sons grew up playing soccer, so I spent a lot of time at practices and games. I was never an athlete, so I always felt like an alien as a spectator! One Saturday, on the way to a game, the idea of a soccer tournament that takes place among aliens on other planets popped into my head. Although I didn't act on the idea for over a decade, it kept orbiting around and around in my mind. At first, I kept imagining that all the characters would be aliens—and I just couldn't get into it. When I finally sat down to write it, I realized that it would be more exciting if a kid from earth was recruited to play with aliens; and as soon as 13-year-old Albert Kinney appeared on the page, the story poured out. I needed a human to guide the journey!

**Q. What inspired you to take the leap into outer space? You've never written sci-fi before.**

My husband Ivan Amato is a science writer, and we have these nerdy date nights where we attend lectures on astronomy and physics and chemistry. It helps to have an in-home



science advisor! What's so exciting right now is how quickly we're discovering new exoplanets—planets outside our solar system. Since the first exoplanets were discovered almost three decades ago, the number of known exoplanets has doubled every 27 months or so. We're up to over 4,000. Think about all those planets out there . . . how can you not want to imagine them?

**Q. You created a new universe for *Game On!* with many different worlds, how did you come up with them?**

I always say that imagination is a muscle; the more you exercise it, the stronger it will grow. Even though I've primarily written contemporary realistic fiction, each character I've ever created has been an imaginative act and so my imagination muscle is

strong. I'm a visual person, so I tend to think by making lots of messy mind maps and webs. See below:



**Q. You created some startlingly imaginative alien characters for this series. Which are your favorites and why?**

I love Ennjoy who plays forward for the Zeenods. The Zeenods are a compassionate and passionate species who use a special breathing technique—a kind of mindful meditation—that helps them connect with each other and lift each other up. Ennjoy is particularly gifted at this. She can be super calm—but then she just blazes out on the field.

Oh, but there's another type of "alien" character who is really my favorite. A major character in the book is the dog owned by Albert's nemesis on Earth. The dog's name is Tackle, and he is so loyal and sweet and brave, he'll reduce you to a puddle of tears. He's not from outer space, but he is another species!

**Q. How do you keep track of the characters and their various characteristics?**

I love to sketch and I tape my sketches of the characters above my desk. When I'm writing, I often glance at them and say hello. See right:





**Q. What books are you reading now? Have any books inspired your writing? If so, how?**

Recently, I've been re-reading Philip Pullman's novels and also his book about storytelling called *Daemon Voices*. For *Game On!*, one of the main inspirations came from Shawn Achor's nonfiction book *Big Potential: How Transforming the Pursuit of Success Raises Our Achievement, Happiness, and Well-Being*. Achor is an advocate of positive psychology and his research is about how shifting the focus away from competition and toward connection lifts everyone up. As soon as I began writing *Game On!* I realized that I wanted to explore the dynamic between competition and connection. Did you know that compete derives from Latin, meaning to strive toward something together?

**Q. What do you like to do when you aren't writing?**

Teaching is a big part of my life. I teach creative writing and music—all ages. I love music and play uke and guitar and write songs. I'm also the co-founder of [Firefly Shadow Theater](#). I make shadow puppets and produce short films.

**Q. What haven't we asked that you would like to share?**

Okay. Here's a confession. When I was the same age as the characters in this book, I tried hard to be a straight A student. One quarter, I was devastated to receive a B in physical education. My father, a widower raising four daughters, requested an appointment with the P.E. teacher to discover why. The reason? I didn't have white socks, which were a required part of the uniform. I actually never liked P.E. growing up, and I think the reason was because the focus of the curriculum back then was on winning and losing, and I guess didn't have the stomach—or the socks for it.

**Q. Librarians from all over the world will read this interview, is there something that you'd like to share with them?**

My hometown library and my school library were true refuges for me as a child and teen. I love libraries and often visit libraries when I'm traveling. When I won the Maryland Library Association's Author Award, I wrote my love letter to libraries and librarians as a song. Listen [here](#).

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