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A Mother, a Teacher, Nancy Drew, and a U.N. Interpreter: The Aspirations of Deborah Wiles

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Deborah Wiles was born in Alabama into an Air Force family and spent her growing-up summers in a small Mississippi town with an extended family full of Southern characters. Today, she draws on these experiences and characters when writing her books, including Love, Ruby Lavender (2001), an ALA Notable Children's Book, Each Little Bird that Sings (2005), a National Book Award Finalist, and The Aurora County All-Stars (2007). Deborah is currently working on a trilogy of novels for readers about the 1960s, the era of "...the Cold War, astronauts, the Space Race, the Women's Movement, the Vietnam War, the protest movements, hippies and the counterculture, and Civil Rights." [For updates on The Sixties Project, visit her blog-journal, "One Pomegranate," at http://deborah-Wiles1.blogspot.com/.] Drawing on our own reading of her books, we interviewed Deborah about making history real for readers, managing to pull off rich connections between seemingly disconnected topics, striving to help young people make difficult choices, and honoring family in her stories. The result was an engaging and laughter-filled conversation.

ON "LIVING HISTORY"

Fabbi: With the new trilogy that you're writing, how do you think the subject matter [the 1960s] will sit with your audience?

Wiles: The first consideration is to write a really good story and not worry about the 1960s. The 1966 novel takes place in Mississippi and Memphis, so it'll be a Southern story and there will be 60s references. I try to make sure that the story is compelling no matter what time frame it is. When I read the Ramona books by Beverly Cleary, I knew that's what I wanted to do; I wanted to do something in that time frame of timelessness. So now I'm tackling historical fiction, which I did with Freedom Summer. If you read Freedom Summer, you will find there are no real references to 1964 or the 60s, although it's totally about that. You don't know why this boy's not allowed to go through the front door, because we never use the words "The Civil Rights Movement."

In the novels, like we do quite often in children's literature, I'll use something called "newsreels" [the actual news of the day], and what I call "opinionated biographies" of famous people of the time. I've already written an "opinionated biography" of LBJ, and they're opinionated because they're my opinion about LBJ, or RFK, or Elvis, or whomever. Song lyrics and all kinds of graphic elements will go into this, and I think that's going to give the framework of "this is the 60s." It's not so much that the book's going to scream "this is the..."
Johnson and Fabbi

60s” because the story needs to create a resonance with the reader that says “that’s just like my life” or “that resonates with me from some universal place that I can connect to.” That’s what I hope for in those stories.

ON BALANCE

Johnson: In the acknowledgements for The Aurora County All-Stars you include a quote, attributed to Wilkie Collins, that says, “Make ‘em cry, make ‘em laugh, make ‘em wait, exactly in that order.” In your novels you address some heavy subjects, but there is plenty of humor to keep the mood from becoming too depressing. How do you balance the humor with the heaviness so that the book doesn’t become too serious, but the treatment of the topic doesn’t feel too trite?

Wiles: I’ve worked hard at that. I still work hard at it and I’m working at that with this new trilogy, too, because there are a lot of heavy topics in it. You can imagine with all the tumult of the 60s. But I want you to laugh because it can’t be completely bleak or completely difficult. I can’t write like that—I need relief every now and then. The place where I find relief is in the absurdities of life. It’s so absurd that Great-great Aunt Florentine [in Each Little Bird that Sings] has to catalog all the food that comes into the funeral home and create this “Fantastic and Fun Funeral Food for Family and Friends.” But that helps me so much with the fact that there are these dead people lying downstairs in coffins and that Peach is so distraught over his Great Aunt’s death. And yet, in the next scene, you play off that absurd piece of it. People are in the midst of craziness or real deep grief, but there’s always something that we can laugh at. It comes out of my own life. There was such grief when I was writing Each Little Bird, particularly, and the laughter is what saved me. I realize that about my own life, so I try and weave that throughout the stories.

Johnson: I think an example of this is the character of Merry in Each Little Bird that Sings. You don’t give a description of her, but she’s a very real character to the reader. Then there is the point in the story when they find Aunt Florentine in the garden, and Merry comes and sits on her and says “Dead.”

Wiles: That’s exactly what I’m talking about. I mean it’s traumatic, you know, for me, but imagine a 10-year-old kid reading this. “Oh my gosh, she’s out flat in the garden, dead.” And when this little girl comes along and flops on her and says, “Dead,” then you’ll laugh—it leavens that. But it can’t be irreverent or it won’t work. I think that’s a practice of time and experience and going over it and over it and over it. I had a really great editor on those three books—one who said, “Now we don’t want this to get too heavy.” But I knew right away that Comfort was going to write the obituaries and that was going to provide us leavening.

ON THE REASON A BOOK IS WRITTEN

Fabbi: Can you tell us about your writing process? Is there anything about your personal process that might surprise readers?

Wiles: Every first draft of a novel I’ve ever written, I throw out the second half once I get it finished. The second half never lives up to the first half. The first half, or actually maybe the first few chapters, is this rush, where I know it all. I know all the characters and I know their situations. And then I get to that sagging middle part and I don’t know what to do anymore, so I plot myself to the end, just so I can have a draft. I make myself write to that. When I get to the end of it, I look at it and say, “Gosh, that’s terrible!” My editor always says, “You have to make the second half live up to the first half.” Something in that first half is a gift. There’s something in it that wants to be expressed and it comes out, but then you have to earn the rest. So, in trying to earn the rest, I have to go back and rework.

In Love, Ruby Lavender, there was no grandfather who had died because there was no grandfather. I knew that Ruby and Melba Jane didn’t like each other, but only because I needed a villain. And my editor kept saying, “Why don’t they like each other? There has to be a reason.” And it wasn’t until the fourth draft that the idea of this grandfather and this father and the accident came to me, and the whole book had so much more depth. I had to go back to the beginning and thread that secret through. And then it worked.

Fabbi: When reading it, that seems like the reason the book was written.

Wiles: Part of that is the reason the book was written, but I didn’t know it yet. I just knew I wanted to write this book about a little girl and her grandmother and how much they loved each other. But in my gut, I wanted to write this book about forgiveness and redemption and suffering and sacrifice. The sacrifice that
Ruby makes when she steps onto the stage and saves Melba Jane changes her whole life. All these things are deep themes in me and things I’ve struggled with, and when I finally reached down further, I realized that was what the book was about, but it took me five years to realize it.

Dismay lived in the first draft of *Each Little Bird that Sings*. Then in other drafts Dismay came back at his funeral or he was lost and there was a “Lost Dog” poster in the end. Then Dismay was found somewhere, dead, but I couldn’t stomach that. So the fourth or fifth time I went through the ending of that book, I finally figured out what to do about Dismay, but it just took me a long time, and when it was right, I knew it. Once again a really good editor was helpful. She kept telling me, “You’re cheating, you’re cheating. Kids lose pets all the time and they don’t come back. You can’t magically make him come back because you want him to.” So, that made me sad. My dog had died while I was writing this book, so I was determined to keep her alive forever within the pages and I didn’t want it to end that way.

**ON FINDING CONNECTIONS**

Johnson: Baseball plays a big part in *The Aurora County All-Stars* and there’s also a strong Walt Whitman thread throughout the story. This is an interesting combination, so where did that connection stem from?

Wiles: I got an assignment from the Boston Globe in 2005—they hired me to write a serial novel—so I went and started investigating the serial novel form. When I took on the task, they said there are a few things: we want you to make sure there are cliffhangers at the end of every section (there were eight 2000-word sections); we want you to write for readers in grades 4-7, which is a wide spread; and please, please, please, don’t forget our boy readers. So I sat down and I thought, “Okay, what did I love when I was in fourth, fifth and sixth grade and what did I love that my brother loved?” Baseball was what I loved, so I knew right away I was going to be using baseball. I had already started a story that had some French characters in it, and Finesse came from that place. Then Walt Whitman came because I had just written *Each Little Bird that Sings*, and in that book I had professed that everything is connected. So, I’m thinking of the 10-year-old that I used to be and about how I had these hard choices to make and I didn’t know what to do.

Johnson: At one point in *Each Little Bird that Sings*, Comfort’s mother says to her, “You did the right thing, even when somewhere deep inside you didn’t want to. Because you knew, somewhere even deeper, that it was the right thing to do.” There are several situations in your books where kids do difficult things and make hard choices.

Wiles: I think that kids are faced with this day after day after day—all of us, not just kids. I’m thinking of the 10-year-old that I used to be and about how I had these hard choices to make and I didn’t know what to do. There were friendship choices, ethical choices, moral choices—the way I had learned right from wrong was so black and white and life was such a big gray area. I needed a lot of help with that. I think I still struggle with those feelings and that’s why my characters struggle too, with, “Well, what is the right thing to do here?” and “Can I hate you?” and “Can I apologize later?” and “Will you like me?” That world of childhood is so sensual for one thing, but the feelings are also so raw—they’re so on the edges. I want to
write about that because it was a big concern of mine as a kid, and I still remember that so well.

**ON HONORING “FAMILY”**

**Fabbri:** Can you speak about the importance of family and how you define family in your books?

**Wiles:** There’s family of choice and family of chance. I truly believe in both, but I think the family that ends up meaning the most is that family you choose. It can include family of chance, but it doesn’t necessarily have to. All of my books are about family, kinship, connection. I surround my readers with loving families, because they need them. They have enough to worry about and that’s what I wanted, and it’s what I didn’t have. I wanted that so very much, so I create it for myself in my books. To me, the family I have finally created and continue to create as I go throughout my days means everything to me. And I honor them in the pages of a book.

The family that I grew up with in Mississippi in the summers, that we would go visit, meant everything to me as a kid growing up. That was the extended family—the aunts that never married and all the bizarre characters that inhabited this tiny town that were related, somehow. And I’d go, “Who are you?” but they knew me. They knew me every single time I showed up. They couldn’t wait to see me, they couldn’t wait to hug me, they couldn’t wait to tell me how much I’d grown. They saved me. And I think that’s a way of honoring that family, too.

**Fabbri:** You listed “old people” as one of the things that you loved, and those relationships with elders are so important in your books. Does that have something to do with your Mississippi summers?

**Wiles:** Those summers had everything to do with those people, who were old as dirt—so old that I thought they’d blow over if the wind blew a certain way! They had paper-thin skin and everything. But I felt a kinship with them. It’s not that they were mistreated, but older people, they’re almost not seen. And I really felt not seen growing up, and I felt like, “I know you.” And I wanted to know them. I had a kinship with them somehow, and they have always been really, really important to me. My grandmother was important, my great-grandmother was important, and I think old people have so much value that we don’t realize. But children know it. So I wanted to write about that.

**Fabbri:** In that same vein of family relationships, Ruby Lavender’s mother is obviously a single parent. It’s not dwelled upon in the book—it’s rarely mentioned. I love it when a book doesn’t focus on that, but kids can see themselves and their family type.

**Wiles:** In each book I have a different family makeup. Like House [in *Aurora County All-Stars*] has lost his mother and Ruby doesn’t really know her father. But I didn’t want it to be a problem. I wanted to move the story forward and I wanted her mother to be a strong, capable woman character. I didn’t want to talk about Women’s Liberation, either. I wanted her to be very capable of taking care of her family and having a really good job in that little tiny town. She’s respected and she’s well-liked. There are so many different ways that family is made up, so it’s important that they’re all respected. Love is the important thing. I was a single parent for a long time and I wanted to honor that as well.

**ON LANGUAGE**

**Johnson:** Your books are full of great lines, sayings, quotes and phrases. One of my favorites is in *Each Little Bird that Sings* when Uncle Edisto says, “Open your arms to life. Let it strut into your heart in all its messy glory.” That’s a great phrase, “messy glory.” Do you have a favorite line or quote from one of your books?

**Wiles:** I like that line a whole lot. I use it all the time. In the blog and in letters I write to people, I’ll often say, “This is one of those Uncle Edisto ‘messy glory’ moments.” I love that line. I think I made it up, but I keep so many notebooks that have little-bitty snippets of this and that and the other in them, I’m really not sure. But, it’s certainly not verbatim from anything. There are scenes in my books that I love particularly, like in *Love, Ruby Lavender* where Ruby comes in and goes to take a shower and she walks out wearing the muumuu, and for the first time she lets Miss Mattie comb her hair. That’s my favorite scene in that book because
I remember the line that Miss Mattie says: "This is a family full of strong women." That's not a special line or anything, but that line was sort of what that book was about, too.

ON STAYING CONNECTED

Johnson: You have used the internet as a tool to share your life and experiences. What do you see as the pros and cons of technology in communicating with your audience?

Wiles: Every other day I decide that I'm going to delete the blog or get rid of the website because it is entirely naked-making. I call it "too nekkid"... it's just too nekkid... n-e-k-k-i-d. But there is just something compelling about story. I'm the one who's always in schools, always at conferences, always working with kids or working with teachers or librarians, and telling them that their story is important. I have lived with fear a whole lot of my life and I don't even know how to qualify that. It's not fear like I'm going to be killed tomorrow, but I was afraid of death, and so I wrote about death.

I want to be brave enough to be as authentic as I can. Something about wanting to be authentic and living an authentic life compels me to have a presence that people can communicate with. The very first blog entry I did on the personal blog that I'm writing right now was about getting married when I was 18 years old and pregnant, and not knowing what I was going to do with my life, and it was so scary. And I thought, "Well, I'm putting that out there." And you would not believe the mail that came from that! It made me cry and cry. Mail from people who'd been in that position, mail from people who said, "I want to be brave enough to tell such-and-such a story." I'm always saying, "It's all about connection," that we're here to connect with one another and share our stories. So there's a fine line to walk—somewhere between too much information and enough that feels useful, meaningful, purposeful.

SOME PARTING WORDS...

Johnson: If you weren't an author, what would you be?

Wiles: I love teaching. I wanted to be a mother more than I wanted to be anything. I wanted to be a mother, a teacher, Nancy Drew, and an interpreter at the United Nations because I had taken so many years of French that I didn't know what to do with. My mother kept saying, "You could be an interpreter at the U.N."

Fabbi: Do you see more picture books in your future?

Wiles: I'm working on a picture book right now about Robert F. Kennedy and I'm hoping I can make it work. Picture books are so hard. I think it's all hard, but picture books in particular. It's like trying to fold a quilt into an envelope. There's so much that you've got to be able to impart in a very small space—every single word counts, every rhythm counts, every moment counts. I have some others, too, that I'd really like to do. I'd like to do a lot of biographies of the people that have meant a lot to me. I don't know that they'll
actually be biography or historical fiction because the RFK book is turning out to be a piece of historical fiction based on fact. So, we'll see.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS CITED


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