

1999/April JACQUELINE WILSON - Publishing News

Sketch out your idea of what the typical children's author should look like and Jacqueline Wilson would fail to match up on all but one count - her gender. She's tiny, bird-like, with stylishly cropped steel-coloured hair, a collection of extraordinary silver jewellery the Hunt brothers would have been proud of, and she's sitting waiting for me in a silver-grey fake fur coat and black leather trousers. Definitely much more rock chic than dear old Laura A, any day of any week.

"I wanted to write all the time when I was growing up," explains Wilson, as we settle down for coffee and biscuits, "but I didn't announce it as I would've been thought weird...I wrote loads of short stories and spent all my pocket money on note books. The only one I've managed to hang on to has seven 'chapters' and, as I was an only child, is about a family of seven children, all with different sorts of problems; you could say, in some ways, that I haven't developed much as a writer as I'm still using the same sort of storylines!"

Wilson left school at 16 and went straight onto a shorthand and typing course, which she absolutely hated. She was, she tells me, never cut out to be a demur little secretary, and towards the end of the course she saw an anonymous advert in the London Evening Standard for teen writers. "I was a teenager and I wanted to write, so I replied and found it was DC Thompson," says Wilson. "I got the job and went up to Dundee to work on a new magazine they told me they called *Jackie* because they thought my name sounded young and trendy."

She came back to London when she was 19, where, in fairly quick succession, she got married, went freelance and had a baby. "I started writing all sorts of things and haven't stopped since," says Wilson, making it all sound as easy as snapping your fingers. "I did a couple of novels that were turned down and then, when I was 25, I wrote what I thought was just a straight novel but it ended up on the Macmillan crime list as it was about two children who were kidnapped." It was successful enough for her to write five more crime

novels, each with a main character who was child. “I knew by then that I wanted to write for children,” Wilson carries on, “so I gave up writing crime, partly to do that and partly because the plots were beginning to drive me mad.”

Her first children’s novel was *Nobody’s Perfect*, for OUP, and she went on to do seven or eight more for teenage girls in what she describes as a very literary style that was more for her benefit than the readers. “But, when I went round schools to talk about the books,” says Wilson, “I saw that the times were changing and children were looking for something easier and more accessible.” At this point Fate stepped in and she was approached by Transworld to do a book for them.

Not wanting to have any conflicts between imprints she chose to write for younger, 8-12 year old children. “I was puzzled that books for this age group, which I remembered as having lots of black and white illustrations, now didn’t,” comments Wilson, “so I asked if it would be possible to have loads and loads of pictures in the text of my story.” The resulting book was titled *The Story of Tracy Beaker* and it was illustrated by a relative newcomer called Nick Sharratt.

This chance pairing has turned into what Wilson describes as a wonderful artistic partnership. “It’s completely even-stevens, and it’s helped my career enormously being associated with him - he’s given me such instant eye-appeal in the shops, something every author craves,” she says. “I buy all his picture books, but must admit to sometimes feeling like he’s committing adultery when he works with other people!” It is the case that Wilson and Sharratt are now perceived in much the same inseparable way as Dahl and Blake - you can’t imagine her work being illustrated by anyone else.

“Nick’s cover for my next book, *The Illustrated Mum*, is his best yet,” enthuses Wilson. “It’s about a tattooed mum, and the research for it was very interesting...I pondered getting a small one myself, but in the end thought ‘no’, because I looked at clothes in my wardrobe that were five years old, and thought how out of date they looked. I wouldn’t want a permanent out of date

image on me. But tattoos are now so cool, I hear there's going to be a tattooed Barbie soon and Transworld are thinking about putting removable ones in the book when it's published!"

Even without a tattoo Wilson makes a pretty damn positive impression, what with all her jewellery. "As a little child I had none and always longed for it," she explains. "I always loved E Nesbit's books and I read somewhere that every time she had a book published she bought herself a silver bangle, so that's what I did - but then I got greedier in between books and people gave me more as presents." Wilson, it turns out, buys her rings and bangles from *The Great Frog* "...where Keith Richard, Robert Plant, other ageing rock stars and one children's author go to shop!"

As you might expect, children don't treat her as an unapproachable grown-up. "They treat me as one of them, because I write like them," she says, "and they always assume I've done everything I write about, becoming ultra-surprised that you can make things up...I almost feel like I'm admitting to telling the most outrageous lies when I tell them I make it all up! When they ask me where my ideas come from, I ask *them* where their dreams come from, because it's exactly the same thing."

Wilson is an inveterate school visitor, going to at least two every week and using her travelling time to write in the notebooks she still uses to create the first draft of the two books a year, minimum, that she writes. She also receives 2-300 letters a week. "There must be something in the National Curriculum that says 'write to an author' because I get bulk envelopes from schools," she grins. "The letters are a complete joy and I reply to them all because I firmly believe I've got to try and return a personal letter as they've taken the time to write to me...sometimes I know it'll be the first letter they've ever got."

If you were looking for a catchall word to describe Wilson, energetic wouldn't be a bad one. Eccentric could come a close second. Lots of people still physically write their books, though not many of them then type them out on an old manual typewriter. "I've a back up, which I bought at a car boot sale, but

very little other modern machinery in my house, not even a washing machine - I've got so many books, 15,000 of them now, I have to work in the kitchen and there's no room to plumb one in," she tells me matter of factly. "And I generally wear black anyway!"

Wilson thinks the fact that she comes from a totally non-literary family proves to children that you don't have to come from a specific type of background to achieve. "It's a lovely feeling to have realised a slightly weird ambition on my own," she says. "I used to be asked what name I used when I said I wrote books...now, if they've got kids, people know who I am. And in the past you were laying yourself open to the one mum and a pensioner scenario at signing sessions - which did happen; now they're fantastic, although not quite up to Terry Pratchett standards."

Maybe not, but Wilson, the only living author in the Bookworm/Waterstone's Children's Top 10, now sells some 40,000 paperbacks a month. Possibly, I'd say, something to do with a knack she has of transferring her infectious enthusiasm and generosity of spirit to the printed page.