



Kate DiCamillo

**Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie**

Kate DiCamillo, interviewed in her home in Minneapolis, Minnesota on November 12, 2005.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your novels, such as *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2001 Newbery Honor), *The Tiger Rising* (2002 National Book Award Finalist) and *The Tale of Despereaux* (2004 Newbery Medal), are filled with the recurring themes of loss, hope and love.

KATE DiCAMILLO: Yes. Love is in all of the books, and that's the connective tissue between them. There's a lot of hope in me; I can feel it. These stories are balls of light for me.

Because of Winn-Dixie is a story about friendship and loneliness and love and longing and dogs. It's about a ten-year-old motherless girl, named Opal, who walks into a Winn-Dixie grocery store to buy macaroni and cheese, white rice, two tomatoes, and comes back with a dog. This dog, in combination with this fabulous kid, opens doors everywhere — not only inside Opal, but in the people that she meets in town.

The Tiger Rising is, again, about a motherless child. His name is Rob Horton. He is dealing with the death of his mother, when he and his father move to a new town. He has terrible eczema all over his legs, and his new principal, fears that it's contagious and tells Rob to take a week off from school. And two things happen the same day that Rob gets sent home. One is he meets a girl named Sistine Bailey, who is what my mother would call "a piece of work," and he finds a real tiger in a cage in the woods behind the motel where he lives with his dad. And that's the story: what happens with the Sistine tiger, the real tiger and Rob's grief.

In *The Tale of Despereaux*, there is a lot of darkness, a lot of despair. There's also a lot of light, redemption, hope. There's forgiveness, there's friendship, there's love. But the world in all of its potential craziness is also there. *The Tale of Despereaux* is the story of an unlikely hero, a mouse, who falls in love with a princess and then must save her. It's a triumph of the human spirit, via a mouse.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (2006) continues these threads of love and hope.

KATE DiCAMILLO: *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* is about a three-foot-tall rabbit who's made entirely of china, named Edward Tulane. And the story is about what happens to Edward when he gets separated from Abilene Tulane, the little girl that owns him.

Miracles and magic pervade the things that I've written, but yet there are no miracles and there is no magic. Life is hard. Life is beautiful. Life is difficult. Life is wonderful. Edward experiences all of that....

In the beginning of the book, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, Edward is more enamored of himself than he is of anybody else. He's a very fine rabbit; he's been constructed incredibly well, and he has a wardrobe of amazing clothing. He's arrogant, and he doesn't care whether Abilene loves him or not. As the journey progresses, as he gets passed from hand to

hand, he learns what it means to love. He gets more and more bedraggled, and his clothing is lost; yet he becomes finer in soul and heart than he was at the beginning of the journey.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your characters are so real and the stories, even those that are magical, are so believable. What is the source of ideas for your stories and characters?

KATE DiCAMILLO: The short answer is that I pay attention. Stories are all around us.

But, the closest I can get to describing what happens is that voices come to me. I feel like I'm accessing something that is deeper and richer than me. Most of my books begin with an image or a voice — one small thing — and I don't know what it is going to become.

The words, "I have a dog named Winn-Dixie," popped into my head in the voice of a small girl with a southern accent. I'd been writing long enough at that point to know not to ignore that kind of red flag. The next day, I put aside what I'd been working on, started with that one sentence, and followed it all the way to the end.

Rob Horton, the main character of *The Tiger Rising*, was a secondary character in an adult short story I wrote, and he wouldn't go away after I'd finished the short story. I couldn't figure out what he wanted, so I wrote to find out.

The Tale of Despereaux came at the request of Luke, my friend's then-eight-year-old son, who asked, "Write for me the story of an unlikely hero with exceptionally large ears." And I said, "You're asking the wrong person, that's not the way I write stories." But, I found the phrase "unlikely hero" so compelling, that's where *Despereaux* started.

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane began with a friend giving me a rabbit doll — forgive me, Edward, for using that word; he doesn't like "doll" — for Christmas. I said, "Oh, he's lovely, what's his name?" And she said, "Edward." And a few days after I received the rabbit, who was dressed very handsomely in Edwardian kind of clothes, I saw him stripped of his finery and face down on the bottom of the ocean floor. Why? I don't know. But that's where his story began in my head. It's a weird kind of disconnect that this whole story grew around a real doll of mine, and here he is, with his "Edward" expression on his face. It's kind of reality bumping into fantasy.

The themes in my books, like in life, are about grace and redemption and you never know when they're going to show up and what form they're going to be in. Stories emerge from keeping your heart open to the people that cross in front of you or the dogs or the mice, and their ability to open you up and enrich your life. I'm continually astonished with myself how different people bring out things in me that I never knew I had inside me. Each new friendship can make you a new person, because it opens up new doors inside of you.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Because of Winn-Dixie* was your first book for children. Beyond hearing the voice of Opal, what inspired its writing?

KATE DiCAMILLO: I didn't know at the time I was writing *Because of Winn-Dixie* where the story came from, but in retrospect I can see that it was a response to a terribly harsh winter here in Minnesota. I grew up in Florida, and I wanted to go home and I couldn't. I didn't have the money. The book was a way to go home. Also, it was the first time in my life I had been without a dog. So I made one up. All of that loneliness and longing in my heart got transferred into the book, I guess....

TEACHINGBOOKS: You said you feel as if the stories come from a place richer and deeper than

yourself. What is it like to be telling these stories?

KATE DiCAMILLO: I feel like I've been blessed. I see the world through stories. And, I'm predisposed to think that as a people, we're hardwired to understand things through the telling of stories. I think that as human beings it's part of who we are.

There's a Buddhist precept that the only thing you deserve is the chance to do the work, and I've been given the chance to do the work. Everything after that has just been icing on the cake: people liking the books and people telling other people to read the books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You clearly love being a storyteller, yet finishing *The Tale of Despereaux* was particularly challenging after 9/11.

KATE DiCAMILLO: I was visiting my mother in Florida when the September 11, 2001 attacks happened. I was working on *The Tale of Despereaux* at that point. I had already gone into writing it with a great deal of trepidation and fear, and then this God-awful thing happens and it was really hard to even get back home to Minneapolis.

On the return flight, I sat next to a businessman who asked me what I did for a living. I said, "I write," and it seemed totally ridiculous in the face of what had just happened. I mean, I couldn't think of anything more pointless than telling stories. He asked, "What do you write?" I said, "I write children books."

Then he asked me, "What are you working on now?" And I said I was writing a story about a mouse who tries to save a princess. I was mortified. Here the world is falling down around us, and I'm trying to tell the story about a mouse who saves a princess. I said "It doesn't matter at all now."

In luggage claim at the Minneapolis airport, the guy came up to me and said, "Maybe you're wrong, maybe stories do matter." I wrote that on a scrap of paper and put it above my desk. That was the thing that pushed me through to the end of telling *Despereaux*, that comment, "Maybe they do...maybe stories matter."

So here I am, sending a two-ounce mouse down into a dungeon with a sewing needle to save a human princess, and I don't know how in the world he's going to do it. I have no idea. That was the first time it occurred to me that writing the story was roughly equivalent to Despereaux's descent into the dungeon. I was tremendously aware of that as I was writing. I thought, "I have to be brave or else I'm not going to be able to tell it." But it's the only way that I can write. If I know what's going to happen, I'm not interested in telling the story. As Elmore Leonard says, I write to find out what happens.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Despite the similarities among *Winn-Dixie*, *Tiger* and *Despereaux*, *The Tiger Rising* seems to have a different tone than the other two.

KATE DiCAMILLO: A friend of mine said *Winn-Dixie* is the way that people want the world to be and *Tiger Rising* is the way that it is. I think that that's part of how people have responded to *The Tiger Rising*. It's what I call my dark child. It's gotten sandwiched in between two overachieving, tap-dance-performing kids — *Winn-Dixie* and *Despereaux*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The image you previously shared as your first glimpse of Edward on the ocean floor is very compelling. How did you take that vision and create what became *The*

Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane?

KATE DiCAMILLO: The image I had was very clear, and so in that way *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* began like other books. But, it was a different experience than I've ever had before because I sat down thinking, "It sounds like it's a picture book." I thought maybe it was going to be 10 pages long. I was astonished to watch the whole story get unrolled in front of me, like a fabulous rich carpet. It kept on going, and I just followed it. More than any other book that I've written, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* wrote itself.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How might you describe what *Edward Tulane* is about?

KATE DiCAMILLO: The book is about the fact that living in this world means that your heart is necessarily going to get broken. But the book also says that's okay. That's the only way to live a truly human life — with your heart getting broken — and eventually getting flooded with love.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You used to write short stories for adults. How do you approach writing for children versus writing for adults?

KATE DiCAMILLO: It is always just telling a story, regardless of the age of the reader. Except, if I'm writing something for kids, I know there has to be hope. I don't necessarily feel that responsibility for adults, but I emphatically feel it for children. That's the only difference. There's no syntax difference. There's no semantics difference. There's no thematic difference.

There are so many difficult things and stories can make them palatable. That's the way I have always felt. In my stories for children, I sometimes show a hard, harsh, dangerous world. I'm going to show you the way it is, but I'm going to also tell you that there's every reason to hope.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your humorous Mercy Watson chapter books for newly independent readers are quite a departure from your novels.

KATE DiCAMILLO: Mercy is pure fun for me as a writer, because I think of her as kind of sorbet — a palate cleanser — between larger works. It's always a relief to come back to her.

I think of Mercy Watson like a superball; there's a bouncy kind of optimism to her stories. She allows me to play, and she makes me laugh. Hopefully readers feel the same way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did Mercy Watson come to you as a character and as a series of stories?

KATE DiCAMILLO: Mercy Watson was a character that had been in my head for a long time.

Mercy is a pig. She lives with Mr. and Mrs. Watson, who are not pigs. I had that basic premise, but I couldn't make it work. I would come back to it, try it, see that I was failing, and put it aside.

It all coalesced for me when a friend got into my car one morning with a piece of toast. I complained that she was getting crumbs everywhere, and she gave me a long lecture about the virtues of toast. I thought, "That's what's missing!" And the story told itself from that point on.

Mercy is obsessed with toast. What was blocking me was the challenge of trying to understand what she loves, what motivates her. That was the missing piece. Toast became the

physical symbol of Mercy's hopefully endearing greed and obsession. Without that element in place, it didn't make sense.

The Watsons have lost sight of the fact that Mercy is a pig, and they love her truly, madly, deeply. They live next door to two elderly sisters, Eugenia Lincoln and Baby Lincoln. Eugenia Lincoln is horrified that a pig is living in the house next door. Baby Lincoln secretly likes Mercy a great deal.

So, Mr. and Mrs. Watson love Mercy. Eugenia hates Mercy. Baby likes Mercy. Mercy loves toast. And the plot, if you want to be so generous as to call it a plot, turns on those elements.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It seems that despite the simplicity of the premise, we could be seeing Mercy Watson books for years to come.

KATE DiCAMILLO: Nothing new ever happens in the books. It's the same old theme. It's toast and the annoyed neighbor and piggishness and selfishness and love, and it just keeps on getting recycled. But there can be a lot of longevity in the repetition of things being told again and again in a variety of ways.

The funny thing is, when I've gone through the relentless editing process, my editor and I are amazed the Mercy Watson books still make us laugh. The same jokes that made us laugh the first time around still make us laugh in the 16th rendition.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What were you like as a child; as a student? Were you an avid reader?

KATE DiCAMILLO: I loved school; I loved the rules, and I liked there being right answers, wrong answers, and being able to give the right answer all the time. And that goes against who many would predict is going to go out and break rules and tell stories for a living.

I was a kid who lived to read. It was the primary pleasure of my existence. It's still one of the primary pleasures of my existence. It's where I draw my sustenance. As a kid books changed how I looked at the world and helped me understand things. Books still deepen me and open my heart.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does it feel to have your book made into a major motion picture? [*The movie version of Because of Winn-Dixie was released in early 2005.*]

KATE DiCAMILLO: As far as books getting turned into movies, I fared very, very well. Wayne Wang, the director of *Because of Winn-Dixie* the movie, understood the book and transferred as much of the feeling of the book onto film as humanly possible. I think he did a fabulous job. And also I'm thrilled because the movie brings people to the book — people that wouldn't know about the book — and that's a great thing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe a typical workday.

KATE DiCAMILLO: A typical day for me is I get up at 6:00, the coffeemaker goes on automatically and the computer gets turned on. I pour a cup of coffee, listen to Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac*, and then I write.

I write two pages — that's all I write. It takes me about an hour. I've learned that's all I'm

capable of and to push myself beyond that is foolhardy. It's a very delicate thing, and I will not abuse it. So I write two pages, then I get up from the computer.

After that, I journal for about half an hour, and by the time that's done, the business day on the East Coast has begun. The phone starts to ring, and the rest of the day is spent dealing with the business of writing. My workday is done at about 3:00.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What can you share about your writing process?

KATE DiCAMILLO: I read my books out loud to myself because of the demands of the story and demands of language. The draft that finally goes to my editor doesn't get into her hands until I have read it out loud innumerable times — sometimes into a tape recorder — to make sure that it sounds right.

I love words; I love the way they sound. Once I've worked on everything else, the last drafts of my books come down to how they sound.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You journal often. How does your journaling inform your books?

KATE DiCAMILLO: When I journal, I write about images that I've seen that I think might make good stories. I write about things that I hear that I think I can turn into a story. I write about the story that I'm working on and where I think it might go.

If there is anything that I think I might use later, I underline it. When I get to a point in my book writing when I don't know what I'm going to do next, I'll come back look at underlined passages and see if the images I wrote still have a certain amount of resonance for me.

I doodle in my journal, too. When I'm working on a Mercy Watson story, for example, I like to draw her.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you find that you end up cutting a lot from your stories before they're published?

KATE DiCAMILLO: No. Actually, I think I'm succinct to the point of trying to write the two-word novel. Editing my work almost never means taking anything out but rather adding, because I'm always stripping down. I tend to under-write rather than over-write.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

KATE DiCAMILLO: We all live in fear of getting blocked no matter what kind of art we're trying to do. It happens all the time, but I prefer to think of it as a bad day. I show up and try, but I may have to ask myself if I need to wait and let myself regenerate and take a break. I know that this thing that makes the stories has to be treated gently. So sometimes I'll just stop and let the well fill up. With my work, sometimes I hate doing it, but I love having done it. The key is to keep doing it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

KATE DiCAMILLO: I like going to schools and telling classes that when I was a child, I failed every “will this kid become a writer” test. You see, when I was a kid I loved to read, but I didn’t write and I didn’t create imaginary worlds. So, if one student walks away thinking, “She’s obviously just an ordinary person, yet she gets to make her living doing what she wants to do. Maybe that applies to me, too,” then I feel like my time has been well spent.

There’s a notion of art in this country that you have to be nutty or special or “called” in order to be an artist. I believe the questions everyone should ask themselves are, “Do you want to do it? Are you willing to do it poorly? Are you willing to do the work of doing it? Are you willing to persist when everybody tells you it’s silly?” If you’re willing to do that, then you can do it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell educators?

KATE DiCAMILLO: Reading a story should be a fabulous, wonderful thing. The most important thing that parents can do for kids is to read with them and to let their kids see them reading books for their own pleasure.

I’m grateful for every teacher or librarian who reads a book and says, “This is exactly the book that so-and-so needs to read; I’ll get it in his hands.” I’m amazed at the network of adults who make sure that kids get books.

And there’s nothing more fabulous than an adult saying to you, “I think that you might like this one.” So I’m grateful every time that happens. It’s an amazing thing that people care that passionately.

Books by Kate DiCamillo

- LOUISE: THE ADVENTURES OF A CHICKEN (illustrated by Harry Bliss), Joanna Cotler Books / HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2008
- GREAT JOY (illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline), Candlewick Press, 2007
- MERCY WATSON TRICK OR TREAT (illustrated by Chris Van Dusen), Candlewick Press, 2007
- MERCY WATSON GOES FOR A RIDE (illustrated by Chris Van Dusen), Candlewick Press, 2006
- MERCY WATSON FIGHTS CRIME (illustrated by Chris Van Dusen), Candlewick Press, 2006
- MIRACULOUS JOURNEY OF EDWARD TULANE, THE (illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline), Candlewick Press, 2006
- MERCY WATSON TO THE RESCUE (illustrated by Chris Van Dusen), Candlewick Press, 2005
- TALE OF DESPEREAUX, THE (illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering), Candlewick Press, 2003
- TIGER RISING, THE, Candlewick Press, 2001
- BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE, Candlewick Press, 2000

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