

My own story: plain and coloured

Welwyn Wilton Katz

Résumé: Dans ce texte, Welwyn Katz évoque certaines méprises troublantes à l'égard de son oeuvre. Au sujet de *False face*, sur les masques iroquois, quelques lecteurs autochtones avaient accusé l'auteur de mal représenter les traditions iroquoises. Welwyn Katz s'interroge ici sur le droit d'un écrivain de dire et de ne pas dire.

A week or so ago during one of many sleepless nights--there now, I've given you a bit of autobiography already!--anyway, there I was, lying in bed while the clock ticked on, worrying because I hadn't the faintest idea what I was going to say about my own story. Gracious! As someone once said to me, "You are an ordinary, middle-class lady who does ordinary, middle-class things and who just happens to write books that are banned in Rainy River!" With a background like that, where do I begin?

All the while I lay there worrying about the main event, so to speak, three bits of seemingly unrelated information were squirreling around in my brain. The first was very recent: an article in the Toronto Globe and Mail about a white woman who had written a story about a black, a story which had been removed from an anthology because, and I quote, the author had been "racist" to write a story about a culture not her own. The second was an anecdote told to me about a story-tellers' session held for professional librarians a few months ago. A native woman had spoken for an hour or so about the telling of native legends, and at the end of the session she shocked the entire room of predominantly white librarians by saying, "We don't want White people to tell *our* stories."

The third incident doing ugly polkas in my brain with these other two was something that had happened to me, personally. (No, not the banning in Rainy River. That was a rather predictable reaction of an overly-zealous library board to my book *Witchery Hill*--or rather, to its cover, for none of them had read the book itself. Though quite disgusting, their actions had more to do with preventing students from *reading* my books than with preventing me from *writing* what I chose. Though I suppose, of course, one could lead to the other....)

No, the incident I'm referring to is one that happened to me after the publication of my book *False face*. *False face* is a novel for juveniles and young

adults about Iroquois masks and traditions and their impact on a modern white girl and a half-Iroquois boy. The real villain of this book is prejudice in all its forms, whether racial or the much broader kind involving pre-judging someone by any kind of external characteristic at all. (For example, my heroine's resemblance to her father prevents her mother from seeing her as a person in her own right). Before I wrote *False face* I researched all the Iroquois lore very carefully. I took the greatest care in the actual writing to treat the Iroquois beliefs with respect. I deliberately made my hero only half-Iroquois, to avoid creating a character who could be seen in any way to speak for a minority group whose culture I do not intimately know. And yet, when *False face* was nominated for the Governor-General's Award for Children's Literature earlier this year, a local Iroquois group protested my nomination, on the basis that this was a story I had no right to tell, a story of someone else's beliefs.

When I first heard about this, I was horrified. *False face* tried to say that people are just people; that it doesn't matter whether someone is native or white; that the basic issues of life are the same for everyone. Those few Iroquois who protested my nomination were denying this. They were saying that a white person couldn't write about what matters to natives. They were saying that the theme of my entire book was in error.

Why? I kept asking. Why can't I write about what matters to natives? And what other stories can't I write, if I can't write this? *Are there stories that are my stories, and stories that aren't?*

I thought about the books I had written to date. Almost all of them involve things I have not experienced myself at first hand. *Sun God, Moon Witch* is based on the pre-Christian European religions of the Moon Goddess and the Sun God. Was I wrong to have invented a plot featuring two gods I have never myself worshipped? In *Witchery Hill*, my heroine, Lisa, is a diabetic. How dare I go into the mind of a girl with an incurable illness that I do not (thank God) have? In the same book Lisa and her friend Mike work against some nasty people who are practising witchcraft. I am not, I do assure you, a witch; I have never been to a sabbat. What right, then, did I have to write about witchcraft? My latest novel, *The Third Magic*, uses Welsh mythology and legend to invent a prehistory for King Arthur's sword Excalibur. Despite my Welsh name, I don't think I have any Welsh ancestors. Genetically I am as close to being pure Celt as is possible in the twentieth century, being Irish, Cornish and Highland Scot on both sides of my family. The Welsh of the time of King Arthur were Celts, too, but is that common bond enough for a modern Canadian writer to dare to take on what was originally a legend of Wales in the Dark Ages?

The ramifications began tumbling in, thick and dizzying. I do not hate my sister, or know a mother who could harm her child; how dare I then write (as I do in *False face*) about people who do? I am not a boy (another bit of autobi-

ography, you see!); yet I use boys as main characters, and I go into their minds and speak their thoughts and feelings. I am no longer a child, and I have never been a child of the 1980's, yet I write about those children; they are my focus and my audience; I speak for them. Should I give it all up because I am telling stories that are not my own?

What then *is* my story? Am I stuck with writing things based on my own rather ordinary middle-class experiences? Or, may I--please!--be allowed to invent and imagine?

"My Story: Plain", or "My Story: Coloured"; it all comes down to that.

There is no creative art that can function without raw materials. The raw materials of fiction are people (or anthropomorphized animals), as well as all the things that matter to people: their strengths and weaknesses, their beliefs and their needs. A writer takes these things from the real world, because there is no other place to get them. A writer is an architect, using real-life building blocks to create an original construction of her own. It is an amazingly personal act, this picking and choosing and discarding and re-forming of real-life things. It is why no piece of writing, not even non-fiction, can be seen as completely independent of its author.

One of the dangers, of course, is that the real-life things the author chooses to mold may matter rather a lot to other people. To these people the author may seem presumptuous and egotistical in the extreme. After all, they reason, how can one person's self-invented plot and characters and theme be important enough to justify using as a *mere building block* a piece of an entire people's soul? One answer I can make to that is that if the author didn't use a piece of *somebody's* soul as a building block, the book wouldn't be worth reading. Another answer, an easier one, is that yes, of course it is presumptuous, and of course it is egotistical. But in a way it is presumptuous and egotistical to write a book at all.

When I think about it, really think about it, I quail at the thought that I have imagined myself as having had ten books' worth of things to say. But the truth is that most of the time I don't see myself as actively saying things or not saying things in my books at all, though of course I am. Even while I'm writing them my books seem to exist apart from me. They seem to want to be born in the same way that babies want to be born, conceived by me and yet independent of me, with their own needs and requirements that must be served. In *False Face*, for instance, when children ask me what parts of the Iroquois legends I mention are "real", I tell them that everything I wrote about the legends is accurate except for the way the masks change ownership. Then I tell them that I had to invent that part because of my plot. Had to. Not wanted to. *Had to*. That is the driving force behind all writers, I believe: that the book must be served. One does one's best to make everything as accurate and real as possible, but if in fiction some aspects of reality must be distorted for the

sake of a larger and more sweeping truth, then the author has no choice in the matter: she must distort reality.

In an article in *CCL* last year, Jill Paton Walsh discussed this very point. Fiction is fiction. In fiction every fact, every bit of physical reality, must be suspect, because all of these facts are chosen and shaped by the author to fit her own--and the book's own--purposes. Everything we *see* in fiction is second-hand, seen through the author's eyes; and everything we *don't* see is invisible either because the author hasn't seen it herself or because she has chosen to keep it invisible. In fiction, therefore, the author is omnipresent.

Readers seem to know this, and as a result they are always trying to draw personal conclusions about an author based upon her stories. This process can be very unreliable. I gave a school talk last year in which the students had videotaped a debate for me: *Resolved, that Welwyn Wilton Katz doesn't like dogs*. Of course they were basing this idea on the puppy sacrifice in *Witchery Hill*, and on the way the family dog is beaten by the mother in *False face*. But two nasty things done to dogs by the authors' characters does not mean they are done, in a form of wishful thinking, by the author herself! In reality, I love dogs, and have a darling old Sheltie of my own. Even more important, any form of cruelty to animals nauseates me. It is for that very reason that I wrote those two horrific scenes. Something really terrible had to happen at those particular points in those two books, and I simply couldn't think of anything more terrible than hurting a helpless living creature. Those students were clever, in a way; for they picked out scenes in two of my books that *did* reveal something important about me as a person, even though what they thought it revealed was wrong.

Sometimes, readers will look at the characters of an author's books, and conclude that they are based on real people whom the author knows. In *False face*, for instance, my family went through a guessing game, trying to figure out who everyone "really" was. When my sister Robbie said who she thought was really Laney, my mother, who is a pretty smart lady, said, "Don't be silly, Robbie. *Welwyn's* Laney."

My mother was right--almost! There *was* a part of me that was Laney. But there was also a part of me that was chip-on-his-shoulder lonely Tom, and a part that was the revolting Rosemary, and one that was Laney's uptight, implacable mother and one that was her stubborn, self-defeating Dad. The germ of *all* these characters comes from my own character. It is the only way I have found to create characters that are "real". What I do is to look inside myself and find bits that are sad or angry or needy or arrogant or stubborn, and then I look at them for a long time, and imagine what would happen if those specific bits were faced with certain specific challenges. And then, somehow, those bits grow and change and become separate people with more characteristics than the ones I started them with. Myself, and not myself. My own story, plain and coloured.

Other personal conclusions can be made about an author by people who notice recurring themes or situations in her books. For instance, people often ask me if there is a personal reason why I write about troubled families. I can only answer that I have a very happy and fulfilling marriage myself, and that my own family life seemed quite normal all the years I was growing up, but it is a fact that my parents were divorced the year after I was married. Was their hidden unhappiness something I sensed and worried about while I was growing up, and is that why I write about kids in unhappy families now? I don't know. I do know that I *choose* to write about difficult family situations for a number of practical reasons. I do it to give my child protagonists the freedom I need them to have from "proper" parents who would send them to bed at eight o'clock and make sure they stayed there; I do it to force the child heroes to be self-reliant (instead of turning to their parents to solve the whole problem); I do it to provide some relevance for a large number of my readers who will also be members of broken families; and I do it to provide interesting conflicts. They are good reasons, but all the same, I wonder. Is my interest in broken families part of "My Story Plain", or "My Story Coloured"?

Or, maybe, is it both?

Which brings me to the true title of this essay: --not, My own story (plain or coloured), but, My own story: (plain *and* coloured). I think the latter has got it right, you know. There is authorial invention and there is authorial experience in every piece of writing there is. Mine is certainly no exception.

Lying there in bed, thinking about the people who had said to me and to other authors, "No, this story is ours, not yours; you cannot tell it," I woke up my husband by suddenly laughing out loud. How could *False face* be anything *but* my story? The plot of *False face* was of my own construction and imagination entirely: it was "my story coloured". The setting was real: places I knew, a city I'd lived in all my life. "My story plain", with only a few minor colourings. The theme was universal, neither Iroquois nor white, and my own choice: "story coloured", again. The characters were extensions of myself: "story plain *and* story coloured". What then was left? Some building blocks, merely; important, as are all building blocks, but chosen and coloured and shaped by me to fit the construction I was making. Some of the building blocks were Iroquois, and some were not; I used calculators and land developers and breakfast cereals as well as Iroquois masks. Does that make *False face* belong to Texas Instruments or to Sifton Construction or to Kellogg's? No, *False face* was *my* story, because no one but me could ever have told it the exact same way.

That's why I laughed, lying there in bed that sleepless night. I knew, suddenly, that *any* story I chose to tell would be my own story. Because the moment you begin to write a story you become a part of it, and it is changed forever more by your presence. You *are* the story, and the story is you.

I leapt out of bed, ran to my office, grabbed the first piece of paper I could

find (which happened to be coloured, by the way), and wrote the heading: *My story, plain and coloured*.



Welwyn Wilton Katz

Welwyn Wilton Katz, who lives and writes in London, Ontario, recently won the Governor General's Award for *The third magic*.