

# Budge Wilson — a Profile of the Author and Her Work

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• Hilary Thompson •



Photo credit: Elizabeth Eve

Budge Wilson

**Résumé:** Auteur pour la jeunesse prolifique, Budge Wilson est revenue dans les provinces maritimes après avoir travaillé vingt-neuf ans à l'Institut d'étude de l'enfance de l'Université de Toronto. Elle a entrepris sa carrière d'écrivain à cinquante ans et a obtenu de nombreux prix littéraires prestigieux. Tout en mettant l'accent sur les sentiments et les relations sociales, elle plonge les héros de ses récits dans les événements contemporains.

**Summary:** Budge Wilson, a prolific author of children's books, lives in the Maritimes after 29 years in Ontario where she had a career as an editor, writer, and illustrator while on the staff at the University of Toronto's Institute of Child Study. She began to write for a living at age 50, and she has since won numerous and prestigious awards for her books. She often grounds her child heroes in contemporary events while focusing on feelings and interactions.

Budge Wilson has lived in and travelled around much of Canada. Born in Nova Scotia in 1927, she was educated at King's College, at Dalhousie University, and the University of Toronto where she did graduate work in English. She lived in Ontario for twenty-nine years before returning to Nova Scotia where she and her husband, historian Alan Wilson, had kept a home at North West Cove since 1954. Her readings and talks to schools, libraries, and conferences, as well as to gatherings of Children's Literature Roundtables, have taken her throughout Canada and to Germany and Mexico. Her books have been translated into French, Finnish, Danish, Italian, Norwegian, Romanian and Greek, as well as Braille.

Budge turned to writing as a vocation after she had worked as a school teacher, a photographer and a commercial artist. She has also taught Physical Fitness to adults for over twenty years. Budge observed and discussed children for five enjoyable years in the fifties as a member of the staff at the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto. There she performed clerical duties and sat in on staff discussions in her role as assistant to the Editor, a writer and an artist for the Institute's *Bulletin*. Budge, who has children and grandchildren, as well as considerable insight into her own child-self, says that she gained further awareness about the conditions and problems of childhood at the Institute of Child Study.

#### Snapshot Images of Budge Wilson:

- So lithe and comfortable before a group. Moving easily to sit talking to a children's literature class about her stories and her writing process. The students' concerned listening; her acknowledgement of the fears of would-be-writers; their responsive open faces; their excited talking -- "She said what I do!"
- At a conference on Atlantic Culture. One of the Education professors crying openly when they meet. "You say what I feel!"
- With children. Looking small and pixie-like. Reading and talking and honouring what she hears.
- Before a reading. Quiet. Reserved. Nervous, not eating, wanting her privacy. Clearing her head.
- In a coffee shop. Eager, excited, sharing. Asking questions and more questions. Wanting to hear the answers.
- At her home being interviewed. Telling of her children in their infancy in the summer at the Cove. The fishers, animal and human, coming and going. The water shining on the stones; the warm wood; the cold Atlantic lapping beneath the dock. Like that sea, underneath the warm, sometimes bubbling, sometimes tense, exterior of a person who cares about her craft, lives a cool purposeful writer.

These snapshots cover the years since Budge returned to Nova Scotia in 1989. Now Budge Wilson is well known throughout Canada. In the 1990s, pieces written about Budge appeared in *Children's Book News* (Spring 1991), *Our Choice* (1991), *CM: A Reviewing Journal of Canadian Materials for Young People* (Canadian Library Association 1991), *indirections* (Ontario Council of Teachers of English, March 1993), *EL: Emergency Librarian* (November-December 1995), *Felicitier* (CLA, July-August 1995), and *Canadian Author* (Winter 1996). There are several websites which give information about her work.

The spotlight moved onto Budge Wilson when she received the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book Award in 1991 for *The Leaving*. She followed that achievement with the Marianna Dempster Award of the Canadian Authors' Association in 1992 for *Lorinda's Diary*, and the Ann Connor Brimer Award in 1993 for *Oliver's Wars*.

Budge then entered the world of readings and book fairs, giving interviews and answering mail, taking these things as a serious part of being a writer, because she did not have an agent. Instead she was her own manager, seeing her career as similar to a small business. Time management was crucial to success. Now, in the last year, she has an agent, Leona Trainer of the Trans-Atlantic Literary Agency. There is always, however, the need to balance touring and writing; Budge has travelled across the country, often getting overtaxed, sometimes for months on end, and then has to recuperate energy for the return to full-time writing.

Budge concentrates on writing her first drafts by removing herself from her domestic and her work-related activities (school visits, readings, etc.) during the months of January, February and March. During this time she works quickly: *Breakdown*, *Lorinda's Diary* and *Oliver's Wars* took about a fortnight to write in their first drafts. *Sharla* took nine days. This concentrated writing she calls her "free fall" after the technique advised by W.O. Mitchell. Her next phase of writing is the slow and painstaking process of revising and fine tuning for accuracy, rhythm, and for validity of dialogue. She loves this aspect of writing and finds it almost relaxing. This she does in the summer and early fall, in a small cabin built by her husband on their property at the Cove. She thinks consciously about the processes of her writing, and the rigours of her craft. She shares her thoughts about the writing process with children, university students, and aspiring writers, often reassuring them that there is no one way to write.

I asked her if anything has changed in her writing and working regimen over the years since *The Leaving*. She replied that she now tries to control the amount of time she spends "on the road." She has had to learn to be selective and to say no, keeping her time and energy focused on her work. She had to cancel her plans to be a leader of the Maritime Writers' Workshop at the University of New Brunswick one summer, for instance. A hip replace-

ment prevented her participation, though she was able to concentrate more on her writing.

Her friend and fellow writer Sheree Fitch understands her dilemma. On a reading tour in Mexico in 1996, Sheree, a much younger woman, watched Budge and admired her energy, and commented that it was hard to keep up with her. On a return journey to Mexico in 1997 Budge suffered severe injuries after a car in which she was being driven crashed, throwing her from the back seat into the front and causing her to slam into the rearview mirror. As Budge herself admits, this provided a learning experience about recovery and a time for reassessment of where her energy flows.

There is a refreshing sense of self-direction and intentionality about Budge. Once she decided to write for a living at the age of fifty, she succeeded in fulfilling her goals. In Canada, she has won fourteen Canadian Children's Book Centre "Our Choice" awards, first prize in the CBC Literary Competition, the City of Dartmouth Book Award, the Canadian Library Association Young Adult Award, the Marianna Dempster Award, the Ann Connor Brimer Award, and she was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1991. In the United States she received other awards. In 1995, her short story collection *The Courtship* was runner-up for the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize. And, most recently, she received the Lilla Stirling Award for *Sharla*.

In the first six years of her writing career Budge wrote several adult short stories, including "The Leaving" and "The Metaphor" (which won 2nd prize in the *Chatelaine* competition 1983). The work for which she has received so much attention began with the publication in 1984 of *The Best/Worst Christmas Present Ever*, the first book about the Dauphinee family in the Blue Harbour series. She created her first children's novel about this family for Clark Irwin who turned it down for marketing reasons. The regional sea-coast community setting in Nova Scotia, one of the attractions of the book, and the housekeeping abilities of Lorinda, who at age nine can cook hamburgers and heat peas, was considered unrealistic. "Not in Nova Scotia!" says Budge. Happily, Scholastic published this and the three other novels in the Dauphinee series, *A House Far from Home* (1986), *Mystery Lights at Blue Harbour* (1987), *Thirteen Never Changes* (1989). The fifth Dauphinee novel, *Lorinda's Diary* (1991), was a Gemini Book for Young Adults.

During this period Budge also worked on *Breakdown* (1988). It is with this book and in the voice of the adolescent Lorinda in *Thirteen Never Changes* that the voices from the adult short stories merge with those of her children's novels, as is the case in "The Metaphor," a story in *The Leaving*, which was originally written for adults. In *Thirteen Never Changes* Lorinda is given the diary of her grandmother. In using the diary voice of the grandmother when she was a child living in Halifax during World War II, Budge taps into her

own childhood. Still a diary-keeper, Budge also kept a diary as a teenager. That diary was destroyed, but Budge has recreated those aspects of it which were appropriate for her concerns in the novel. In a more benign version of "My Cousin Clarette" (*The Leaving*), an evacuee from England moves into Laura's home. The war, with its attendant fears, loss, and displacement, intrudes even more than it had done previously into this house in a military city in wartime.

Suddenly the reader becomes aware of the levels within the novel: Lorinda's loss of her grandmother (whom she did not know as well as she would have liked), her grandmother's wartime and adolescent growing pangs of awareness, and the evacuee Hilary's confusion, loss and fear for herself and her family. This configuration of psychological states is reflected in the divisions within the narrative, which move from diary entry to third person narration and back again, incorporating also the history of both the Dauphinee family and of wartime England and Halifax. The diary form is also used in "The Diary" (*The Leaving*) as both a therapeutic journal (written on instructions from an analyst) and a means of self-discovery, as well as a narration technique. In a similar vein, we hear the diary voice in the outpourings of an adolescent self in letters to a Pen Pal in "The Pen Pal" (*The Leaving*).

This device continues in *Lorinda's Diary*, giving Budge a means to speak from within her main character (except for the brief third person narration in Chapter One when James gives Lorinda her diary). Having established in *Thirteen Never Changes* the voices of concern, frustration, and confusion which spill out in adolescence, Budge now uses this to focus on her concern about being locked into oneself and one's problems, and on the need for vehicles of self-expression in her characters' lives. Mr. Collicut, suffering from a nervous breakdown in *Breakdown*, learns this lesson from his children who speak through their music, athletic endeavours, and through theatre, but Lorinda uses her diary.

With the emergence of these voices, Budge's success with her young adolescent stories expands. Both *Oliver's Wars* (1992) and *Sharla* (1997) understand the personal psychological consequences of the turmoil facing young people today. In them, she depicts families fractured by the Gulf war: unspoken anger, the alienation of moving house, the resultant bullying of a newcomer, and teenagers' reactions to nationwide unemployment — all are situations which drive young people into themselves until they are explosive from anger and frustration. It is possible that a different kind of book may come out of Budge's tumultuous experience of the Swissair disaster which engulfed many people in North-West Cove and the surrounding bays.

Budge's career in photography and illustrating work ended because of poor eyesight. She wanted to write illustrated short stories for children.

However, her first short story for a five-year old was far too long for that readership and market. She sent it to the Little, Brown Writing Contest for which one of the judges was Marilyn Day of *Magook* magazine. Ms. Day asked for some more stories about the Dauphinee children. From her request the illustrated story of "The Sale" was published in this magazine and came to the attention of Clark Irwin who encouraged her to write a full-length Dauphinee novel. "I wanted to write short stories for children. It was quite a while before anyone suggested that I write a novel for children and I fought it" ("Meet the Author", *Children's Book News*, Spring, 1991). A short illustrated book like *Mr. John Bertrand Nijinsky and Charlie* (1986) is perhaps the kind of book Budge had in mind. It is here that the honed-down understatement of her "Beginning Chapter Books" for readers in grades 2, 3, and 4 is to be found.

Perhaps, however, the controlled style of *Cassandra's Driftwood* (1994), *Harold and Harold* (1995), *Madame Belzile and Ramsay Hitherton Hobbs* (1990), *Duff the Giant Killer* (1997) and *The Long Wait* (1997) would never have emerged if the work on the adult and young adult stories had not occurred. There is a gentle humour in these stories set off by the "life forces" that Budge says underlie every piece she writes. Such forces might include "self-esteem," "anger," "shyness," "loneliness," "betrayal," or "fear." The more complicated the novel, the more complex is the life force. As her characters in the books for beginning readers work their way through the life forces that beset them, Budge releases our concerns for them by the obviousness and the irony of their need for and choice of others who can help them. Harold, a shy and lonesome eight year old, finds his soul mate in a blue heron he names Harold. Ramsay Hitherton Hobbs, an overweight, underachieving newcomer in the community, meets a lonely, French-speaking, skinny Mme. Belzile. Together they solve their problems and he sheds his pounds while he improves in, and she practices, the French language. Cassandra's shyness and fear of others causes her to adopt a piece of driftwood shaped like "a strange but wonderful person" (19), a dancer called Alonzo. Her love for the piece of natural sculpture causes her to speak out for herself and to release herself from the trap of shyness. Again, Budge had used this technique, with gentle irony, in her adult story "Loretta and Alexander," which won a prize in the *Toronto Star* short story contest in 1988 (July 13). Here the plump, unloved and capable Loretta steals the prime camping site from the nervous, unsure, "if-only" poet, Alexander. In the gentle irony of their differences, opposites attract after the initial resentment.

These adult and child stories differ only in the degree of detail and anxiety. Budge's use of the other character to mirror Harold's ungainly loneliness is one of the best examples of her understatement in these children's books,

The heron had long thin legs. 'Like me,' said Harold, looking down at his bony knees. The bird also had a long beak which took up most of the space on his face. 'Like me,' smiled Harold. 'Except that it's a different shape. And what's more,' he concluded, 'he's all alone, like me'. (14)

Like Mr. Nijinsky's cat, Charlie, the animal and human share an uncanny resemblance and the human's need is met.

If Budge Wilson had a totem pole or talking stick, it would be formed out of driftwood and the animals on it would be the cat, the heron, and the polar bear. Her young adolescent novels *Sharla* and *Oliver's Wars*, as well as her beginning chapter books about Cassandra, Harold, Ramsay, and Mr. J.B. Nijinsky speak about the block of a wooden unexpressed shyness, fear, or anger. The stories her talking stick tell would release the animals, children, young people, and adults from their blocks. The wooden stick would become alive whenever a reader responded to it. For these books ask us to empathize, and perhaps identify with, the characters caught in their "life forces."

What are Budge's future plans? Any new stories? Her new stories are also her old stories. Her short stories from the three collections have been collected in over forty anthologies in North America. That work continues. Now that Stoddart Kids has published *The Fear of Angelina Domino*, however, Budge Wilson's next two children's books are underway. Tundra Books will bring out *A Fiddle for Luther* in 2001. It is picture book illustrated by Susan Foote. Budge's popular character, Duff, is to appear in a sequel. *Duff the Giant Killer* was short-listed for the Hackmatack Award in 2000. *Duff's Monkey Business* will published by Formac. *The Cat that Barked* has already been short-listed for the 2001 Hackmatack Award. Budge Wilson will be busy.

### Books by Budge Wilson

- The Best/Worst Christmas Present Ever*. Toronto: Scholastic, 1984.  
*A House Far from Home*. Toronto: Scholastic, 1986.  
*Mr. John Bertrand Nijinsky and Charlie*. Illus. Terry Roscoe Boucher. Halifax: Nimbus, 1986.  
*Mystery Lights at Blue Harbour*. Toronto: Scholastic, 1987.  
*Breakdown*. Toronto: Scholastic, 1988.  
*Thirteen Never Changes*. Toronto: Scholastic, 1989.  
*Going Bananas*. Toronto: Scholastic, 1989.  
*Madame Belzile and Ramsay Hitherton Hobbs*. Halifax: Nimbus, 1990.  
*The Leaving*. Toronto: Stoddart/Anansi, 1990.  
*Lorinda's Diary*. Toronto: General/Gemini, 1991.  
*Oliver's Wars*. Toronto: Stoddart/Irwin, 1992.  
*Cassandra's Driftwood*. Illus. Terry Roscoe. Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield P, 1994.  
*The Courtship*. Concord, ON: Stoddart/Anansi, 1994.  
*Cordelia Clark*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1994.  
*The Dandelion Garden*. New York: Putnam/Philomel, 1995.

*Harold and Harold*. Illus. Terry Roscoe. Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield P, 1995.  
*Mothers and Other Strangers*. New York: Harcourt, 1996.  
*Duff the Giant Killer*. Illus. Kim LaFave. Halifax, NS: Formac, 1997.  
*The Long Wait*. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Don Mills, ON: Stoddart Kids, 1997.  
*Sharla*. Don Mills, ON: Stoddart, 1997.  
*The Cat That Barked*. Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield, 1998.  
*The Fear of Angelino Domino*. Don Mills, ON: Stoddart Kids, 2000

**More Information on Budge Wilson can be found in:**

<http://www.canscaip.org/bios/wilsonb.html>  
[http://www.library.ns.ca/child\\_lit/budgebio.htm](http://www.library.ns.ca/child_lit/budgebio.htm)  
[http://www.library.ns.ca/child\\_lit/wilson.htm](http://www.library.ns.ca/child_lit/wilson.htm)  
<http://www.mcdougallittell.com/lit/guest/wilson/index.htm>  
<http://www.publib.saskatoon.sk.ca/novel/author/pages/182.html>

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*Hilary Thompson* retired from teaching children's literature and children's theatre at Acadia University in June 1999. She is active in her research and continues to publish poetry and to write fiction. This year she directed Calgary playwright Frank Mohers's **Odd Jobs**, conducted drama and writing workshops for children, and is currently involved in a production of **The Wizard of Oz**. She is the editor of **Children's Voices in Atlantic Literature and Culture: Essays on Childhood** (Canadian Children's P, 1995).