

"My Books Are My Children": An Interview with Welwyn Wilton Katz

• Marianne Micros •

Résumé: Dans cette entrevue accordée à Marianne Micros et faite par courrier électronique, Welwyn Wilton Katz, auteur entre autres romans de *False Face*, *Come like Shadows*, *Out of the Dark*, répond à ses critiques; elle nous fait part des émotions qu'elle cherche à faire passer chez ses personnages, et explique sa conception de la création romanesque.

Summary: In this e-mail interview with Marianne Micros, Welwyn Wilton Katz, author of *False Face*, *Come Like Shadows*, *Out of the Dark*, and other novels, responds to her critics and discusses the techniques and emotions she brings to the characters and stories she creates.

MM: As a writer, you have come under some attack recently, so I think you would enjoy hearing how my students responded to the whole "appropriation of voice" and other charges levelled against you. When they presented a group seminar on your novel *False Face*, they chose one student (David Upper) as primary lecturer.¹ Then, by pre-arranged design, as soon as he started to express a point of view, someone would jump up from the audience and interrupt him. If he said he would speak on Native rituals, someone would declare herself an expert and come up and take over; likewise, there were experts on divorce, race, etc. etc., all of whom silenced him. After all this, David took off his hat and sunglasses (he had fairly long hair) and revealed his "real identity" as the author, Welwyn Katz. He then gave his/her point of view, and defended him/herself in relation to all the topics. He ended by saying of *False Face* that, despite all these dissenting voices, "It's a damn good story!"

WWK: What an interesting children's literature course you must have, Marianne! And thanks to your student, David Upper. I hope he was speaking as himself rather than in his role as me! This anecdote addresses so much of what I want to say about the reading of books generally, as well as the reading of my own. A story has an integrity, and if the story is to be enjoyable, it probably cannot be interrupted by other voices crying "foul." Most readers, and especially children, read a story from beginning to end, and as far as I know, don't interrupt themselves to think upon topics such as divorce, race, point of view, etc. Of course, critics and academics do do that, sometimes.

MM: Some theorists would say that the reading of a book depends on whether the reader is the author's "intended reader." In the case of children's literature, some break this

down into age groups. I never like to think of a book as intended for a certain age group. Do you write for a specific age group?

WWK: First, I never write for a particular reader, or even a group of readers. I don't determine the age-range for any of my books: my publisher decides that after they are written. Who I do write for is my own particular characters, who usually have problems (who doesn't?) and who need to deal with them. When I imagine characters, at first they seem rather like ghosts, or, perhaps I should say, more like beings with bits of them in this world and the rest of them in another: That is, I see parts of them (usually their hearts and minds) rather more clearly than others, when I begin thinking about a book. As I think through their dilemmas, and build a plot around them, the characters become more and more like real people to me. In my latest book, *Out of the Dark*, Ben was and remains my son, and I love him now and loved him all the way through writing the book, even when he was being the most idiotic in his behaviour with the other children in Ship Cove. Now, when I say this, I'm not saying that I am the murdered Frances, who in my book was Ben's real mother. What I am saying is that I love Ben the way any mother who gives birth to a child loves that child. I did give birth to him — in a way, more than Frances did — and I understand him deep to his core, and weep for him still, when I remember his terrible moments in the parking lot and what has happened to him because of them. I cried many times when I wrote this book. Sometimes I simply had to get up from the computer and go away from Ben who so desperately needed comfort. It was hard for the mother in me to not let him have that comfort until he had earned it, until he had done all the things he needed to do to come to terms with himself and his past. I dream about him and wonder about him still, three years after the book came out. Obviously, then, to me Ben is real.

I hope I am a good enough writer to bring characters like Ben to life in the *reader's* eyes too, whoever that reader might be. I work very hard, in fact, not ever to misrepresent my character's heart and mind, but to let the character show by his/her thoughts, words, and actions, what he/she is feeling, and to write it so that even when the *character* doesn't know why she/he is feeling the way she/he does, the *reader* will. And so, what I hope for from my reader is a kind of dichotomy: that the reader, while retaining the intelligence to put together clues about my character's dilemma, on an emotional level will "become" my character.

I know that when reading a story that is exactly what I want: a believable plot-line, realistic setting, honest characterization and the intelligent weaving-in of the outer truth that the characters can't yet know; and as well and equally important, a story that will make me "enter into" the story and "become" the main character. So, for example, I would like my reader to forget for a brief space of time that she's a professor teaching the book or a literary critic judging the book as to its political correctness or interpreting it in the light of the newest theory. I want that reader to *become* Ben, to cry for him as I did and as many other people — admired writers such as Kit Pearson, for example — told me they did. I want them to remember what it was like to have *become* Ben when they later teach and analyse the book.

In a recent article in *CCL*, [Cornelia Hoogland's "Constellations of Identity in Canadian Young Adult Novels" 86, 23:2 (Summer 1997)], I felt that what I got was a post-modernist's attempt to deconstruct *Out of the Dark* and another of my books, *False Face*, into political statements. I think that books are about individuals, and are not political statements about people as a whole. Individuals think what they think, and feel what they feel, and do what they do, because they have individual pasts that have made them the way they are.

To be true to the individual characters in my books, I must sometimes allow them to think or act in a politically incorrect way. This is not me, Welwyn, thinking that way, or a statement from me that all people should think in that way. It is just the thoughts or action of one character who is to me a real person, and who must therefore be honoured by truthful representation, warts and all.

I have found it very painful over the last decade when people try to reduce some of my books into mere political statements. In her article, Cornelia Hoogland quotes a graduate student, Kara Smith, as saying "I don't feel that everyone Tom would have come across on the First Nation's [actually Six Nations'] Reserve would have been that way."² In fact, Tom encountered only two people. These two people were individuals with their own way of behaving. One of them was a child who'd lost interest in Tom after he moved away (children do often do that). The other was an elder. Even elders are individuals. To imply that I use his comments as the voice of an entire people is unfair, both to me and to *False Face*.

Smith goes on to express another opinion: "Tom was left with the following impression then: I don't belong here because my mother is White, and therefore I belong in the White world (whatever that is). I doubt this is the message a First Nations' Reserve would convey, speaking from a person's point of view whose husband is Mohawk" (Hoogland 33). Does Kara Smith's marriage to a Mohawk make her an authority on *all* Mohawks? I wonder what she would have to say about the news story run on television on March 12, 1998, about the black man, adopted and raised by Mohawks in Quebec, and married to a Mohawk woman, with whom he has children, who has spent his whole life on the reserve, and now cannot be part of the community because, the tribal authority dictates, he is not Mohawk by blood?

I do not try to make a blanket statement about all Reserves or all native people using just one news story. Individuals are all different. It is not the novelist's job to make sweeping statements about political things, but to write stories about events that could have happened to people who could have been real individuals. I really disagree with those postmodernists who think that any book can or should be broken down (deconstructed) into elements taken out of context. Catherine Madsen in the Winter 1996/7 issue of *Cross Currents* writes that we have found over the last few decades, "with a mixture of elation, anxiety, and plain irritation, that any theory of the world we construct can be deconstructed."³ Should the post-post-modernist's task then be to deconstruct the deconstructionists?

MM: *I think it's important for people to understand the nature of writing fiction, the emotions involved in it. You are not doing a politically correct social study — you are*

writing a novel. It contains feeling, and sometimes the feelings of flawed individuals. It is unfortunate when readers and critics do not realize that.

I think that you do portray convincingly how an adolescent's mind works. Of course, Tom would be confused about his identity, based on his heritage and on the society he's now living in. Of course, Ben will have trouble adjusting to a different culture and place. Do you really feel that you are in your character's mind at the time, thinking as he would think?

WWK: Yes, I do think so. But it is more complicated than that. I'm also being the author. I'll talk more about this later if you like. But yes, I generally enter the mind(s) and heart(s) of the adolescent protagonists to a very deep level, as deep as I can go in my imagination. And I have very rigid rules about point-of-view in my own writing. What I consistently try to do is to allow my main character(s) to be in the place they want or need to be, while at the same time allowing myself to use that desire of theirs to let me enter one of their minds so that I can observe and narrate the entire scene through that particular character's viewpoint.

I try to keep to one point of view per scene if I have more than one protagonist. For instance, in *Whalesinger* there are three main characters: the mother whale, Marty, and Nick; and even if more than one of them are in a particular scene together, I try to choose only one of the main characters to be the eyes, ears, brain and heart for the plot elements and reactive moments of the scene. I then transcribe this by writing it all down for the reader. Because this requires that a main character be present in each significant scene, I do occasionally break this rule (usually because it would be horribly complicated to have the main character(s) present and might require pages and pages of artificial scenes). In *The Third Magic*, for instance, in one scene I allow the bad guy to be a point-of-view character. The plot required the reader to know what happened at a certain point, and I simply couldn't place Morgan or Arddu in the scene where the thing happened because each had chosen to be somewhere else at the time. And, of course, I sometimes make mistakes. I've recently found a point-of-view inconsistency in a scene between Laney and Tom in the school cafeteria, since the publication of *False Face*. Darn.

So, I believe I am in my character's head. I absolutely loathe it when characters are so obviously made to do exactly what the writer wanted. I think a writer should never manipulate characters, turning them into puppets. Characters should be real enough to have their own reasons for everything they do or say. And sometimes these things are not politically correct.

MM: Can you explain, then, how you are conscious of being the author, even while entering the mind of a character?

WWK: I'm not entirely within the character at any time in the book, because I have already decided on the external structure of the book and so am also generally keeping an eye on that structure. I think that I become a bit schizophrenic when I write. I am both me, the tactician and writer, and whichever main character I have chosen to be the point-of-view character for the scene. The characters tell me what they are doing and why. I listen and try to see how that fits into the external structure I'm trying to work with. If it doesn't, I go back to

the character and offer him/her alternative reasons why they might do something different. If they accept that, then they will do what they want to do, and I am benefiting because I don't need to change my external structure of the book.

Sometimes, however, it becomes impossible to rationalize what the character wants and needs to do at a particular point in time with my own external structure. I have notes of my plotting for *False Face*, for instance, where I wrote down a question: Why would Laney go to her father's place after the scene in the store? I wanted her to do that, because I wanted him to be in the climactic scene, and I could think of no reason for him to come into the house of the woman he loathes except to confront her morally. That required him to know that she was trying to sell artifacts. But I knew Laney would never tell him that important fact about her mother. And so I changed the external structure to put the police in the scene, giving Laney every reason to choose to give them her father's address rather than her mother's. That got her there. She had the small mask in her backpack. I remember asking myself if Laney's dad was the kind of person who would go through her backpack, and saying, no, no, he wouldn't, not unless he had a good reason. That was why he decided to look for a sweater or something else warm that she might have in there. So this is how it works, me entering the character's mind and asking them why they might want to do something, and if they don't, I have to re-plan my plot so that it will allow the character's wants and needs to take priority. I honestly can't explain it further.

Perhaps there is a part of me that has always been the adolescent I once was. But even that doesn't explain it, because I think my main adolescent characters are all different from each other and quite often extremely different from the adolescent I once was. At bottom, I suppose it all comes down to how an individual writer's imagination works.

Oh, yes, and one further thing. Have you noticed how most adults think that kids or adolescents are virtually another species? In stores, for instance, they always wait on the adult first, even if the kid has been there for ages. I hate that! I think that adolescents have the same kinds of minds and hearts as adults do, the same reasoning skills, the same rights, and the same basic needs. The big difference between adults and kids is that all kids are on a journey to adulthood, and the really interesting kids turn it into a quest. By contrast, most adults have reached their goal (hah! okay, they think they've reached their goal, and wonder why they aren't happier!) and so are no longer questing. That pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is still there for the really interesting kids, though to the vast majority of adults it has long been given up for lost.

I think kids are human beings. And so I listen to them, really listen. I ask them about important things. Maybe that's why I understand so well how adolescents think and feel. I'm known as "Ikuko-Mama" to the sixteen or so fourteen-to-eighteen-year-olds in the Japanese Anime Club my daughter belongs to. These are kids who love Japanese animation. They joke that I am, in alter ego, the only mother figure in one of their favourite animation series. In a way, then, I'm one of them. They still will keep secrets from me, as all kids do from all adults, but they trust me to understand them if they do tell me things.

MM: *What is it like to look at the world through Ben's, Laney's, Tom's, Marty's, Kinny's (etc.) eyes?*

WWK: Well, it depends on the eyes. The eyes of my characters see what hurts them, and look for what they need and want. Sometimes they get to see what they need and want, and then I am happy for them. Sometimes they are only able to see what hurts them. Then I, too, am hurt. When they reach a moment of epiphany, as Morgan does at the end of *The Third Magic* when she realizes that she must nurture, love and raise to adulthood a baby who will kill her only friend, I weep with her — and with her, I'm proud of the honour she has that will make her do it. When I wrote the final line of the book (before the epilogue), I jumped up and down and laughed and cried for the rightness of it all, the blending within Morgan of circle and line. She and I both celebrated her moment of truth, and we both wept at it. I am not Welwyn at times like these, I am somebody else altogether, a blending of Morgan and Welwyn, perhaps, neither one thing nor the other, but both in one.

Yes, I think that's the best way to describe it. I am the union of the writer and the character, in control of my words (though lines like that last one in *The Third Magic* come to me from "above," not through any conscious effort of my own), and controlled by the character's feelings. Yes, it's complicated.

MM: *Could you tell us something about the point of view in *Out of the Dark* — so totally within the boy's mind?*

WWK: *Out of the Dark* is, of all the books I've written, the dearest to my heart. It is also, I think, my best book. I thought long and hard about point-of-view in this book. For a while I tried writing it in the first person. But it didn't work for me. Though I had thought that a first-person viewpoint would not be much different from that of a third-person one, it turned out I was wrong. First-person can be so whiney. Anyway, I decided to use third-person, and so to narrate only the scenes in which Ben participates. It was very difficult to do this, partly because I had to link the narrative so tightly to Ben and Ben only, and partly because it was emotionally horrible for me to be only in Ben's head all the time, when he is so screwed up, so sad, so lonely, so devastated by guilt.

When I use two points-of-view (that is, when I have two protagonists between whose heads I can leap, so allowing the story to be told through two sets of eyes and ears, two minds and two hearts) the job of story-telling is much easier. But I simply couldn't allow myself that luxury in *Out of the Dark*. If I had, I would not have been able to make Ben's aloneness so complete for the reader. Had there been a second protagonist, each reader would have "become" Ben, and then, in relief, (s)he would be allowed to leave him and "become" that other point-of-view character, and so (s)he would not be the same kind of lonely that Ben is. I want the reader to *be* Ben. And so I deliberately decided that his loneliness would be the reader's, that his way of looking at the world would be the only one I would allow the reader to have. It gave me some hard moments, let me tell you. But I thought it extremely important to do it this way. It was also, though I see that only in retrospect, an incredible intellectual challenge, to weave three sets of stories together with only one person's mind and heart to make it all intelligible — or

rather, I suppose, two people's — Ben's and the reader's!

MM: *It is perplexing, then, when an adult academic, reading against the intended reader, reads the book so differently, as a sociological map. I think we have to find a better way of bringing literature for young readers into fields of academic studies, a way that doesn't lose the emotion and pleasure one can derive from the story.*

WWK: Your comment is, I think, a very important one. The academic way of tearing a book apart can be exactly that: destruction. Academics can be guilty of reading a book through a particular lens, or theory, and thus destroying the part of that book that had once been alive. No one should study children's books academically who doesn't, first and foremost, love and honour the stories they have to tell.

This is not to say that academics cannot criticize a book. I've analysed many kids' books myself. But when I am critical of a book it is because I think the novelist hasn't been true to the characters, or the plot is unbelievable, or the setting is false, or there is something seriously wrong with the point-of-view, or any of those things that remove me from the world of the story and make me think like a critical writer. When many academics criticize a book, however, it is because they are bringing to it the ammunition that goes with their own agenda. They have so much riding on getting academic papers published and having their own trendy theories accepted, they simply look at books as meat to be torn to pieces and devoured.

Now I'm probably going to get into trouble about saying that, but I don't really care any more. There comes a point when you simply have to fight against the gag of political correctness and *say something*. As you must see, Marianne, it is not only books that can be criticized for being politically incorrect. In fact, I will go further. I will come right out and say that when a *book* is labelled "politically incorrect," then the *author* will be branded with the same words in the public eye.

MM: *It is true that some of these critics who read books as if they are sociological documents forget that they are works of fiction with a great deal of literary tradition behind them. How would you classify your books?*

WWK: I don't classify my books at all. Some people have said my books are in the genre of "magic realism" similar to that Robertson Davies used. All I know for sure is that to satisfy me, my books must be realistic enough to allow any willing reader to enter the story, while still containing the sense of "other" that is not "realistic" at all. You could call the one common element in my books magic, I suppose, but then there is *Whalesinger* which contains no "real magic," only the magic of a mother whale whose singing can change history — or so she thinks. I like to think of my books as "edgy," or "pushing the boundaries," something like that.

I absolutely agree with your statement that some critics read books as if they are sociological documents. Get a life, guys! That's what fiction is about — people with lives that are not necessarily consistent with particular societies and whose behaviour does not always follow the rules.

MM: *Regarding your mention of "real magic," I always ask the students, in relation to *False Face*, if it is fantasy or realism. I don't want them just to say, it's a mixture. I want*

them to realize that what's fantasy for one culture is reality to another, that Natives would be insulted by the white world calling the "magic" of the mask just a fantasy. So, for some of us, the book is totally realistic and possible.

WWK: Yet again you've got me thinking! *False Face* is certainly realism to Laney, Tom, Alicia and Ian! As for readers, I don't know. Some native people have responded to it with such outrage (that I, a white person, should dare to tell "their" stories; that I, a white person, should use the sacred symbol of the false face in stories at all) that I guess it must hold the authority of realism for them, too (though of course that may not be the reason). By the way, in case you want to know how I answer their objections: First, this is not a native story, and it is not one that any of them have tried to tell; so how can I be accused of taking their stories away from them? Second, I believe that all stories worth thinking about are at bottom about important things like faith, love/hate, prejudice, etc., and there is no way to let such issues into a book if you leave out everything that is sacred to somebody! In any case, not all natives have responded in this way, and not even all Iroquois. I bought my own set of masks from a store called Min's on the Six Nations Reserve. Surely if they can accept their craftsmen selling such masks to tourists, they have no right to object to seeing them written about in books! Yes, indeed, some natives would indeed be insulted by the thought that some white people would imagine the power of *Gaguwara* to be mere fantasy.

MM: *I wonder if you can say more about "binary opposition"? The criticism is that Tom only sees himself vs. one other — Native vs. White — and that the book implies that only those two exist.*

WWK: Gosh. Binary opposition. If I understand that concept correctly, it has something to do with a polarization of representations within a book, that somehow the really intelligent reader can reduce my books to two opposing statements or theories. In *False Face*, for instance, does it mean that Hoogland has reduced my book to the issue of white vs. native? I had a hard time understanding what she had to say about this. She says that "the novel does not suggest how Tom can deal with these submerged tensions or how they might co-exist with other aspects of his life" (Hoogland 34).

Well, here she is both right and wrong. Where she is right is that I do not, and Tom does not, and Laney does not (etc.) solve all Tom's problems for him. I do not believe in a book ending with everybody riding off happily into the sunset. Such would be too simplistic and utterly unrealistic. What I hope happens to my characters is that by dealing with each individual event throughout the story they gain new tools for dealing with life, so that at the end there is *hope* for them, but no *promises*. They are human, after all. They will continue to make mistakes, and continue to learn from them or not, depending on their individual internals. How can I or anybody else promise anything else for anyone? Promises for salvation are within God's domain, not the author's.

However, Hoogland is wrong because *all* my protagonists in *all* my books do a lot of growing and changing (otherwise they could not, at the end of the book, confront the problems that beset them throughout the book). I think it is made amply clear at the climax that Tom has had a real insight into his own

character that enables him to understand Alicia sufficiently to prevent her from doing what she might, so easily, have done to Laney. I think this has to do entirely with his coming to understand that he has been doing with his mother and with the other kids in school (Laney excepted) exactly what Alicia does to Laney: looking at things in a prejudging (prejudiced!) way by choosing as preferable exactly one external characteristic over another. Tom is prejudiced against his own mother and what he has inherited from her — even prejudiced therefore against parts of himself — simply because he perceives his mother as “only white.” Alicia is prejudiced against Laney simply because she perceives Laney as “only an alter ego for Ian,” because of her external likeness to him. By linking himself to Alicia — by seeing their common error — Tom is able to say the right thing to stop her.

And what is that right thing? “There’s somebody *in* there behind those looks!” he cried, to Mrs. McIntyre, to all of them to himself. “You don’t know who, you never even tried to find out. You just looked and decided, and the real person never had a chance!” Is this the voice of someone who still looks on the world as divided into two opposing parts, white and native? How, then, can Hoogland think that I leave the book with Tom having acquired no grace to deal with his “submerged tensions”? (Hoogland 34). And when she breaks *False Face* into only a “White” vs. “Native” issue, she merely repeats the errors that Tom and Alicia both make until they realize the truth: that the world cannot be broken down into two opposing halves. Neither can a book, unless it is a very bad book, and I do not believe that *False Face* is that.

I believe that the great evils of the world have often come about by people or nations concentrating on the *differences* they find in themselves from other people or nations. I believe that there is a necessity for people to concentrate on their common humanity rather than to separate themselves into opposing and perhaps even hostile groups. When I say that Tom’s tears are universal, I mean it. *We all cry. We all are the same in that human way* (among many others). Yes, of course, I believe we are all different, too. Isn’t that obvious to anyone who reads my work? What my characters come to believe is that their differences are not great enough to be used to support statements like “natives are better than whites,” or “whites are better than natives.”

Now for *Out of the Dark*. Hoogland suggests that this is a simplistic book that can be reduced to two issues. Other people besides Hoogland have been upset by *False Face*, and so I was willing to take the time and the effort here to show my side of things. But I refuse to defend *Out of the Dark* against Hoogland’s accusations. No one else has ever said anything negative in public (or in private as far as I know) about this book since it was first published in 1995. Anyone without a prior agenda who reads *Out of the Dark* will know that Hoogland’s statement that it “deals with identity and belonging in an unsatisfactory way” (Hoogland 34) is simply nonsense.

MM: *Would you comment on the article about your portrayal of mothers which appeared in CCL a few years ago? [Adrienne Kertzer, “Mad Voices: The Mothers of Welwyn Wilton Katz,” CCL, 21.1, no 77 (Spring 1995)].*

WWK: Regarding that article, where “my” mothers were indeed presented as harmful or useless by their absence, or mad or bad by their presence in my books: I found I couldn’t even finish reading the article the first time I saw it, it seemed so nonsensical to me. Since then I have reread it and found that the writer wasn’t entirely off the mark in the specific points, though I think her overall thesis is all wrong. For example, while I agree that the mother whale is a loving example of “motherhood” to both her calfing and Marty, I don’t see that I have had to leave the world of humanity in my books to portray decent, kind, loving mothers. For example, Jenny in *Sun God*, *Moon Witch* is a really good mother to Patrick, and a loving mother-substitute to Thorny, telling her the truth about why Thorny’s real mother is absent in her life (and that she hadn’t abandoned her at all.) The Moon Witch in that book is not a mother-figure to Thorny, and doesn’t pretend to be. She is, however, the mother of Belman (Bel = Baal) and their behaviour to each other is not that of the victim-son and victimizing mother, but equally vicious in their attempts to destroy each other (which happens to be well-researched mythology). Marty’s mother in *Whalesinger*, though absent from the book, is not a bad mother; indeed, she is shown in Marty’s flashback discussing her daughter’s problems with the psychologist, something that a mother who didn’t care would never do; nor would she have given permission for the tests if she wasn’t worried about Marty’s learning disability. As well, Ben’s mother in *Out of the Dark* is incredibly present, though dead. And she is *not* harmful by her physical absence in the book. Frankly, I don’t think I’ve seen a mother anywhere in literature more loving, more kind, more supportive of her children. What is harmful about her absence is that Ben feels that he is responsible for it, not that she isn’t there for him now.

Out of the Dark shows that when you take responsibility for things that are *not* your responsibility you can make yourself sick. It is through Ben’s own actions, in a sense rebuilding his mother as something alive to him forever, that Ben is freed and made whole again. There is also in that book, by the way, Gudrid, whose wisdom exceeds all the other Vikings’ put together, and who loves her son Snorri heartily and healthily. I know that this book came out after the article on “the mothers in my books” but it was not written in response to the article; in fact *Out of the Dark* was at the publisher’s before the article was even published, I believe.

I don’t think strong mothers are either non-existent or omnipresent in society. Nor do I think the other kinds of mothers must be “absent” for their children. I think there are plenty of weak, loving mothers in society, such as Mrs. Aubrey in my first book *The Prophecy of Tau Ridoo*. I think there are also mothers struggling to do their best in alternating custody situations for their children, such as Mike’s mother in *Witchery Hill*. I think there are rather stupid mothers who believe they know best for their children, and try to stop those children from doing whatever they want, only to find out that their interference causes more damage than good: such as Kinny’s mother in *Come Like Shadows*. I think there are some mad, bad mothers, such as Mrs. McIntyre in *False Face*, whose madness and badness comes out fully only in the right circumstances. And then I think there are some mad, evil mothers in real life who torture their little two-

year-olds, or starve them to death, or imprison them. I have never portrayed such a mother because such a situation would be too odious for me to bear writing about. But Jill Paton Walsh did, in *Chance Child*. Let's face it, Mrs. McIntyre is not a loving mother, and she favours her older daughter, but if you were to ask her how she felt about her children before the masks entered her life, I think she would say she loves and treats both her children equally, and she keeps their life running efficiently and well. Of course she doesn't, but she *thinks* she does. I think, frankly, that I have portrayed mothers in my books in most of the ways they can be in life — as a varied group of specific individuals.

MM: *What role does research play in your creation of these stories and characters?*

WWK: I do enormous amounts of research for most of my books. With regard to setting, I try to make a research trip to all of the place(s) where the book will take place (the North Pole was, unfortunately, beyond my resources, though I read a lot about it when I decided to set *Time Ghost* there.) For *Out of the Dark* I certainly went to L'Anse Aux Meadows and Ship Cove and walked the bog so often I can see and feel it now. For *Whalesinger*, besides living in the area for a year, I went back for a week-long research trip to make sure the setting was exact. I also did a lot of research on whales, and on Francis Drake and his circumnavigation of the globe, including the controversy over the location of Nova Albion and the six weeks or so that he stayed there. Nothing that I said in the book about him was made up by me. There really was a coastal frigate that had to be left behind when Drake set off across the Pacific. Drake really did abandon several crewmen. There really were two Doughty brothers. Drake really did execute one and keep the other near him in the way I described. I learned about these things from the journal kept by the ship's priest as well as accounts from the Spanish Inquisition of what sea-captains had to say about meeting Drake after he'd robbed their ships.

Although *Whalesinger* runs a close second on the amount of research I did, probably *Come Like Shadows* was my most research-intensive book. Overall it took just about a year to plan the plot and research the history of Macbeth the man and Macbeth the character in Shakespeare's play, to follow the real Macbeth's footsteps from his birthplace in Dingwall (where they don't even know about him!) to the place of his death in a stone circle near Lumphanan, to learn as much as possible about the Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario, to find a perfect place for the staging of the play in Edinburgh, and to learn how professional acting companies put on a play, from its first day read-through till opening night and beyond. Lots of work, but tremendously fun as well.

MM: *Would you comment on your use of language and imagery? It's your writing ability that makes the books what they are. And let's not forget story. My student was right — in the end, it's the fact that something is a "damn good story" that counts.*

WWK: I love language. I love the way words sound in my mind and on my lips. I think about how each sentence sounds, both by itself and in juxtaposition with its neighbours. I am absolutely rigid about how a section ends, or a chapter. It must be *right*. And the best sentence in the book should be, I think, the last one. It should make me want to laugh and cry at the same time. I don't always

succeed in this, of course. But there have been whole books I've rewritten (*Come Like Shadows* is one) simply because I had written the perfect last sentence, and it didn't work with the rest of the novel as it was.

Given all this, however, I feel I have a long way to go. I look at writers like Cormac McCarthy (*Suttree*) or Claire Mackay and feel incredibly humbled at their immense and appropriate vocabularies. Sometimes what I think I ought to do to increase my facility with language is read with a dictionary and notebook in hand, but then I think that would take me too far away from the story and the reader wouldn't like that, so I don't.

I took a workshop last summer with Tim O'Brien (*In the Lake of the Woods*, *The Things They Carried*, etc.) and learned a lot about the value of simplicity. He would throw away every adjective and adverb in the dictionary, and he tells his workshop participants that above all things one should simply let the story tell itself. But in fact what he is really doing in his own work is telling you the story *himself*. You can see this in *In the Lake of the Woods* when he tells you at the beginning of the book what the story is going to be, what the ending is certain to be, and then he tells the story (and somehow manages still to keep you in suspense about what's going to happen). I think this is successful because he makes his characters so fascinating and enigmatic (and obviously, therefore, never goes into their heads at all), rather than because his stories are intricate or even particularly "grabby."

Well, Tim liked my characters, loved my dialogue, and hated my narrative style. I think he hated it for two reasons. First, my style is not identically structured sentences one after the other, very clear, very "upfront," coming right out and telling the reader the story. Rather my style is complex with layering that reminds one of previous scenes or that foreshadows scenes to come, like voices drifting in from outside (as occurs in *Out of the Dark*). The second reason Tim hated my style, I think, is that he feels most comfortable with third person fly-on-the-wall narration, and I try very hard to let the story come to the reader from the eyes and ears of the main characters. Doing this introduces the characters' own uncertainties into the logic of the plot, and so makes the plot less simple to delineate, but it brings the reader much closer to the characters (they *become* them, rather than *observing* them). The way I write, the reader must deduce the story; the way Tim writes, the reader is handed the story as if it were something already complete, existing before he wrote it. I have to say I really liked *his* style. So maybe future stories from me will be plainer. Who knows?

MM: *What part does feminism play, or not play, in your writing?*

WWK: Feminism has no place in my writing, except that I don't see males and females as unequal in potential. (I think that feminism is supposed to promote *equality* of the sexes, rather than *female superiority*.) I suppose that feminists who see my portrayal of some female characters as stronger than some male characters might find a political message. But I have also portrayed some male characters as stronger than some female ones (e.g., Lucas, though enthralled by the man he sees in the ancient mirror, is stronger in fighting the three weird sisters than Kinny, who knows she is in peril yet thinks there is nothing she can

do about it.) So, let the feminism issue rest. I just write my characters to be what they have to be, given their initial problems and their need to sort these problems out. I abhor the idea that female protagonists should represent the whole of female *homo sapiens*; or that male protagonists represent the whole of male *homo sapiens*. It is irresponsible writing to do such a thing. Characters are *individuals*, not *universal types*!!

MM: *Is there a kind of censorship in a critic's response to a text? What role might a critic or academic play in silencing a writer's voice?*

WWK: This is the most important question you have asked. I believe that it is worse for the work of dead writers, who cannot come to their own defence in interviews such as this one. But it has an important effect on living writers also — for example, myself.

The critics do not affect what I write, or even how I write it. They have never once made me be untrue to the book I am writing. What they do do is make me not *want* to write.

Imagine, if you will, that the conception of a baby takes perhaps five months, instead of the usual short but pleasant interval. Imagine then, that instead of nine months of being pregnant, gestating this new life within yourself, you need only, say another five or six (or maybe, two or three years). Imagine then that labour lasts a year or two or three instead of eight to thirty hours. Imagine the intense love, bonding and devotion you would feel for the child that is finally born after such an interval — from sheer cognitive dissonance if for no other reason! Now imagine putting enormous loving energy into that newborn child, feeding it, taking it to the doctor, guiding it, comforting its sorrows and sharing its delights, until the child is grown to full independence and can leave you and go into the world with all your gifts to it intact and sufficient to help this new young adult live its life with as much happiness and success as possible. Imagine that process taking, say, a year or so instead of the usual 18 to 20. Now imagine that your child is defamed in the public press, attacked for invalid or poorly understood reasons; imagine that a whisper campaign is started against this child of yours that he/she is “politically incorrect” or a representative of some political group. Imagine being the mother of that child, standing by helplessly while slowly, inevitably, your child loses her/his lovely and hard-won freedom, strength, independence, and personal power. Would *you* want to create more such children, only to see them personally attacked and perhaps destroyed?

When I wrote *False Face* I had never heard of the “appropriation of voice” issue. It took almost a year before the whisper and letter campaign against that book reached me. I was never given a chance like this to tell of my feelings, my research, my point-of-view as an author. Now it is eleven years later, and though I have been nominated for four Governor-General's Awards (and actually won one), won the International Fiction Contest (for *False Face*), the Vicky Metcalf Award for a body of work, the Ruth Schwartz Award for *Out of the Dark*, and the Max and Greta Ebel Award for *False Face* (for a book that fosters understanding between peoples!) as well as garnering numerous other honours in

this country and in the United States, librarians in small public libraries are still told by certain powerful other librarians that I am a controversial writer, and some teachers are even told that they should not teach my books. One librarian I met in a small town in the BC interior told me he had taught *False Face* in a largish city in Alberta until he was told by his superiors that he couldn't do it any more.

"Oh, yes, buy her books if you want to, but don't display them; keep them behind your desk in case any child asks to read them." (The last is an exact quotation from a librarian I met at a school where I was doing a reading.) I hear about these things only in passing. Imagine what I'm not hearing!

My books are my children. I love them dearly, warts and all. Some of them I love with an even greater passion than others, but all of them are very special to me. I have done my best to give my characters skills and a sense of self-confidence to help them to thrive. I have sent them out into the world with hope and love. And when they are unfairly attacked or treated with disdain — or worse, when they are torn to pieces and bits of them taken to build some other person's theory about *me* — well, I just don't want to write any more. I just don't want to do it.

That's where I am right now. In more than two years I have been incapable of creating characters and letting them make books for me. I have written a new version of *Beowulf* for kids aged nine and up, but I haven't been able to do anything truly original. I have lost my will to take on the hard, hard mother's role for any new novel. That's what the whisper campaigns and academic dissections have done to me, the mother of these books. I no longer feel good about making a new life, only to see its brightness grow tarnished and fail, simply to serve other people's purposes.

MM: *Why do you think your books are singled out, picked on?*

WWK: *If it is true that they are singled out for criticism, it could be because over the last eleven years I have defended my books both in writing and in public addresses, defended my own writer's view, defended the right of all writers to an imagination, and spoken out against political correctness as a noose around the artistic neck. No doubt that has made some supposedly objective people who disagree with my views more or less hostile to my books.*

Another reason why I think my books are singled out is because they may be threatening to some readers for reasons other than political correctness and academic theories contrary to the spirit of my books. (Political activists and people whose livelihood depends on grimly-held academic theories must respond to my books because the books are too well-reviewed by other individuals and receive too many awards for them to be ignored.) When I talk about my books possibly being "threatening" to some people, I mean that there are evil, mad mothers out there in the real world, and people are threatened when a novelist acknowledges this in a book (such as *False Face*). There are frightened people who are hanging on with their fingernails to the "real world," and the possibilities of there being other worlds beside this one (*The Third Magic*) or inexplicable strangenesses in this one (whales that can change history in *Whalesinger*; real magical powers in *Come Like Shadows* and many others; gods bringing their battles to the earth and using humans like pawns in *Sun God, Moon Witch*) terrifies them.

In fact, however, I generally *don't* think that my books are singled out for criticism in the *majority* of cases. I think what happens is that there are so few critics and academics taking children's literature seriously in this country that the opinions of the very few of them that are critical of my books are given far more weight than they ought to carry. I do wish that there were more people in Canada taking children's literature as seriously as they ought. We need more reviewers, more review journals, and much more public education. Too many adults think children's literature is only for children. One of my daughter's friends was not allowed to do a Grade 12 Independent Study Project on Children's Literature because the teacher said it wasn't literature. Imagine!

MM: *It is very painful for a writer to have her children attacked. It is also sad that there are some academic writers who have lost the pleasure of reading. It is my hope that more and more critics will learn again to enjoy the books they read and that PhD studies will not forsake literary appreciation and sympathy for authorial intent. My biggest wish, Welwyn, is that you will write more novels! They have given me, my students, and my children great pleasure.*

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Notes

- 1 This seminar was presented in the Winter of 1998 for 37-274, Children's Literature, at the University of Guelph.
- 2 Kara Smith, cited by Cornelia Hoogland, "Constellations of Identity in Canadian Young Adult Novels," *Canadian Children's Literature*, 86, 23:2 (Summer 1997), 32.
- 3 Catherine Madsen, *Cross Currents*, Winter 1996-1997,

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