

Interview for Children's Book Week tour, 2015

1. How did you get started in children's books?

I actually began publishing work for adults – short stories and poetry – when I was in my 20s; in my late 20s I began working on my first novel, although I didn't know it was a novel at the time. It was a series of vignettes, recollected from my childhood in Park Extension (Montreal). Over the years those vignettes formed a novel and, when I eventually sent it out, it was Kathy Lowinger, the well-respected children's book editor, who said it would make a wonderful young adult novel. Ten whole years, and many revisions, later, it was published as *Split*, my second novel. In between, I wrote another YA novel, *Klepto*, which became my first published book in 2004. I guess you could say that once I discovered the genre, I was hooked. It was a perfect fit for the subject matter I had always tackled – adolescence – and my image-oriented but sparse writing style. I fell into it willy-nilly but quite happily. I've always been a fan of children's books.

2. What (or who) inspires your writing or art?

Other good books inspire me: writers who use words like magic to create images and emotions and tell great stories. But I think most of my inspiration comes from deep within me, from a place that seems to have been there from birth. I always wrote, even as a child. And I always loved books. My inspiration is everything I've ever felt or experienced or heard about. I want to translate it all into words on the page. It is love of the act of writing, the actual sitting down and doing it – even though it is hard and often frustrating – that inspires me to keep going. There is just so much to say, so many things to churn into fiction, or even poetry, as I did in *Yellow Mini*. I'm also inspired intellectually by social and political issues that have always concerned me: media images of women, consumerism, inequality. Young people have so many questions and such a complicated terrain to navigate. I am inspired by them and their quest to make sense of life. I'm inspired by wanting to share my values with them, by wanting to share stories that they can perhaps relate to. Inspiration is everywhere and in everything. I love what Rilke said to the young poet: "for the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place." And I totally agree with him when he advised his young charge to "go into yourself and test the deeps in which your life takes rise."

3. What was your favourite book as a child? Why?

I had so many favourites, from *The Red Balloon*, which featured black and white photographs of a boy chasing a red balloon through the streets of Paris, to the *Freddy the Pig Detective* series. But the first book I remember becoming obsessed with was *Harriet the Spy*. Harriet was just so me! She was an adventurous little girl with a huge curiosity and imagination. She was not a typical female lead: I suppose she was a "tomboy" – for lack of a better word – in her jeans and sweatshirt, and so was I. My best friend and I became real Harriets in our neighbourhood. We would carry around a flashlight and

notebook and spy on certain houses and take notes about the comings and goings of the unsuspecting inhabitants, determined to uncover a real life mystery. Harriet herself was a good metaphor for a writer, always watching, always deducing, always snooping, always ready with her pen and notepad. I loved her then and I still do now. Thank you Harriet and thank you Louise Fitzhugh for creating her.

4. How can teachers use your books in the classroom?

My young adult novels can be used to teach any of the elements of literature: setting, symbolism, character, plot, theme. I can do workshops on any or all of these. They can be used to discuss important issues, such as bullying (*Picture Me*), loss (*Yellow Mini* and *Split*), family (*Klepto*, *Tattoo Heaven*, *If You Live Like Me*) and many more. I think they can be used to get kids into reading, a chore I am well used to as an English teacher of 20 years myself, by asking kids to discuss the choices my protagonists make when dealing with adversity and then thinking about their own lives. My new picture book, *My Granny Loves Hockey*, can entertain younger children, but also get them to think about history and how life is different today than it was for their parents and grandparents.

5. What are you looking forward to most during TD Canadian Children's Book Week?

I am looking forward to visiting places I've never been because I am filled with wanderlust. It awakens my senses to be in a new environment. Then, of course, I am looking forward to meeting other people who love books – writers, teachers, librarians, students. And, last but certainly not least, I am looking forward to meeting young people in another part of the country, to hear what they have to say about the world they live in. I remember meeting writers in a school setting when I was younger and how inspirational it was to me. I am looking forward to being part of a week dedicated to the celebration of books. How wonderful!