



Authorgraph No.171: Jerry Spinelli

Article Author:

[Jeanne Clancy Watkins](#) [1]

[171](#) [2]

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Jerry Spinelli interviewed by **Jeanne Clancy Watkins**.

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Though his work places him at the top of the A-list of children's literature in the US, Jerry Spinelli is still what Americans call 'just plain folks' - an author who finds the greatest truths in the various hometowns in which he's lived and the people he has met there - truths that give life to the hometowns and characters that he creates.

Jerry Spinelli was born and bred in Norristown, Pennsylvania, 'a small town with big city features'. Jerry was familiar with all of it. 'I pretty much lived on my bike from 5th Grade onward, and I got to know it pretty well. It was a lot more interesting place then than it seems to be now.'

'If only for convenience sake, I date my birth as a writer back to about half-way through high school.' When Jerry was 16 his high school football team won a big game with a spectacular goal-line stand. 'While the rest of the town went crazy with blaring horns, kicking cans and such, I wrote a poem.' Jerry showed it to his dad and forgot about it until 'a couple of days later I opened the Norristown Times Herald to the sports page - which was about the only thing I read in those days - and there was my poem.' I thought, this is cool. Maybe I'll be a writer.'

After high school, Jerry majored in English at Gettysburg College, a small liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania, and took all the writing classes they offered. After graduating from Gettysburg, he enrolled in the writing programme at Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, Maryland) and received a Masters degree in creative writing. 'In terms of formal education that was about it, but frankly I'm not sure how much that helped anyway. It seems to me that writing is something you get done by writing.'

Upon leaving academia, Jerry intentionally chose a boring job, writing about valves and switches for an engineering magazine. He wanted to 'have something left over at the end of the day to put into writing that really mattered'. For years, he 'wrote in the cracks' - over his lunch hour, after dinner, and at weekends. Each day when lunch hour arrived, Jerry closed his office door and this is how many of his books were written, including **Maniac Magee**.

Becoming a children's author was, says Jerry, 'an accident'. He never set out to write children's books. His purpose was to tell the stories he wanted to tell. The first four books did not find a publisher. At the time he was 'heartbroken by the rejections' but now he sees them as the exercises by which he taught himself to write. 'I guess, without even realizing it, little by little I was giving myself a writer's education.'

Space Station Seventh Grade, Jerry's first published novel, 'began on a trip down to my kitchen and refrigerator to get a bag of fried chicken - left the night before - to take to work that day, only to discover that the bones were still there but all the meat was off them!' One of his 'six sleeping angels' was the culprit and Jerry still doesn't know who it was.

By the end of lunch hour that day he had the first paragraphs of a new book ? written now ?from the point of view of the kid who I imagined stole the fried chicken?.

Though Jerry always ?imagined an adult audience? when writing, his agent couldn't sell **Space Station Seventh Grade** as an adult book and it was published as Children's/YA (Young Adult). ?I didn't even know what YA meant ? but that's what I was and I guess I decided I liked where I was and I've stayed there ever since. I still don't consider myself as a children's writer. I'm just a writer. I write for everybody. I don't write for kids; I write *about* kids.?

Jerry and his poet-author wife, Eileen Spinelli, have six grown up children and now sixteen grandchildren. ?People tend to assume that I must get a lot of my ideas from our kids and grandkids, but I use memories of my own kidhood as a source more than my children.? Not that there wasn't that chicken thief to get it all started. Over the years, Jerry and Eileen have lived in a series of small towns around Southeast Pennsylvania ? an area better known for its big city and suburban sprawl. They raised their family in a small, former steel-mill town called Phoenixville (the setting for **Love, Stargirl**) and later downsized to a home outside West Chester.

Almost two years ago, Jerry and Eileen were temporarily relocated to yet another small town, Wayne. They fell in love with it. Jerry feels like they've ?moved back to the 1950s?. Their cosy 100-year-old house is on ?a quiet, leafy street?. It needed a lot of unexpected work but met their most important requirement ? it has three bedrooms, ?two for offices and one for sleeping?. The couple have a strong working relationship, critiquing each other's writing and helping each other through snags ? and that help is just ?ten steps down the hall?. They have just written their first book together ? a non-fiction book that's currently with their publisher and potentially entitled, **Today I Will**.

Jerry tries to write every day, in the morning. Though he mentioned an imaginary notebook to hold his ideas, he actually maintains a folder labelled ?NEXT? to hold the clippings and notes that could possibly be the next book.? The notes that became **Stargirl** were first made in 1966 ? ?a story about a boy who lives underground, perhaps in a subway or sewer? which in a thirty-four year evolutionary process became **Stargirl**. The contents of the folder are lighter now by ?some twenty-eight items but there's still more to go?.

One of the original seeds for **Maniac Magee** (1991 Newbery Medal, American Library Association) was the 1964 song by Martha and the Vandellas, ?Dancing in the Street?. ?**Maniac Magee** is my fictional expression of the vision of everyone ? of every race and background ? dancing in the street that that song evokes.? Maniac himself bears a resemblance to a childhood friend of Jerry's ? ?an orphan, an itchy kind of kid who literally ran everywhere. When he got the itches in class the teacher would say, ?Okay, Carl, get up and take a lap.? Carl would trot around the edge of the classroom while the rest of the kids continued with their arithmetic and spelling.? Later, on a New York school visit, Jerry was introduced to ?a 6th Grade student who loved books so much she had her own library?. She also had a problem in that her younger siblings and pets ruined her books while she was at school, so every day she packed her entire library in a suitcase and carried it to school. Jerry gave her his address and secured a promise from her to write, but he never received a letter. ?To this day, I have no idea if that girl ever realized that she became Amanda Beal in the book that became **Maniac Magee**.? Jerry's hometown, Norristown, Pennsylvania, is also vibrantly brought to life as Twin Mills.

Wringer (1998 Newbery Honor Book) began when Jerry noticed (over several years) a series of articles in the **Philadelphia Inquirer**. Every year on the day after Labor Day, an article appeared about a pigeon shoot that raised money for the park system in a small town in central Pennsylvania. Animal rights activists clashed on an annual basis with the locals and their traditions. ?I recognized that there was a story there somewhere, but I wasn't sure how to get into it.? Then one year, the article happened to mention ?that some of the participants were kids called trapper boys or wringers whose job was to collect the bodies of the dead pigeons or, if they weren't dead, to wring their necks until they were. Suddenly, I realized that I had my way into the story. I asked myself a question, ?What would happen, in a town that kills pigeons and where every boy who turns ten is expected to become a wringer, if you had a boy who dreaded his tenth birthday because he does *not* want to become a wringer? You might say that the book is the answer to that question.?

Jerry's latest book, **Smiles to Go** was published in the US earlier this year and he's currently making notes for his next book – perhaps a work of science fiction.

Though over the years he's sold seemingly countless books, it's not just the book sales and reviews that I find most gratifying but what happens on the other side of the sidelines. The post-apartheid government of South Africa ordered 600 copies of **Maniac Magee** to distribute around the country, and the US State Department has contracted with an Egyptian publisher to translate, publish and distribute **Stargirl** throughout the Middle East. A production of **The Library Card** is on tour throughout the hinterlands of Japan. All three books are being used to promote understanding among people. Stargirl Societies are appearing here in the US and around the world – using Jerry's book as a guide. For Jerry Spinelli, that's what's really important – having a legacy beyond a book on a shelf.

Jeanne Clancy Watkins is Head of Youth Services, Chester County Library System, Exton, Pennsylvania.

The Books

Published by Orchard Books:

Eggs, 978 1 84616 700 3, £5.99 pbk

Love, Stargirl, 978 1 84616 925 0, £10.99 hbk

The Mighty Crashman (new edition), 978 1 84616 960 1, £5.99 pbk (August 2008)

Milkweed, 978 1 84362 485 1, £5.99 pbk

My Daddy and Me, 978 1 84362 673 2, £5.99 pbk

Stargirl – Pink, 978 1 84616 599 3, £5.99 pbk

Stargirl – Silver, 978 1 84616 600 6, £5.99 pbk

Published by HarperCollins:

Loser, 978 0 00 714377 1, £5.99 pbk

Wringer, 978 0 00 715601 6, £4.99 pbk

Other titles mentioned in the Authorgraph are not in print in the UK but may be available via Amazon.



[Jerry with Animals.jpg](#) [3]

Jerry with Bernie the rat and Chi-Chi Chinchilla

Page Number:

14

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