



Authorgraph No.80: Rosemary Wells

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Rosemary Wells interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**

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Rosemary Wells talks a lot, and fast. She made it quite clear from the start of our interview that she hadn't much time ? she had a hair appointment ? with the underlying implication that she doesn't suffer fools gladly and if I wanted her to talk about her writing I had better look sharp. Look sharp I did, plunging straight in as there was clearly no time for chit-chat.

Rosemary has strong views about everything relating to children and children's books. In America, at least, she sees those who work in the field of children's literature as fighters and she is right out in front leading the battle. She talks with passionate revulsion of the junk culture which American children are fed ? the television programmes with their endless commercials; the Nintendo games of simulated violence; and the children's books which hurry children out of their childhood into an unnaturally premature awareness of sex. Unless writers, publishers, librarians and booksellers stick together and resist these new distractions for children there will be no future for books, she asserts. She explains that American children are being reared as a generation of ?customers?. Their capabilities as ?doers? or ?thinkers? are being constantly eroded by the mindlessness of their activities. She firmly believes that the more TV a child watches ? and she points out that children, on average, watch more TV in America than in Britain ? the harder it is for them to think or concentrate at other times.

Strong stuff, but Wells does not waver. With another dig at American culture she makes the following bold claims: ?Good children's books are the only part of the culture that isn't about buying. In fact, the reverse is true when you read. You are more at the end of a book than you were at the beginning,? she asserts. ?Publishers, writers, booksellers and librarians must get together to show what good books are and to get them into schools so that children can know from their first experience of books that reading is a pleasure.? This is another important strand of her argument. Reading must be about enjoyment. ?The very worst thing is to be didactic. To put cause before character is fatal.? Her most recent book, **Voyage to the Bunny Planet** has been picked up as a ?green? propagandist book, but that is not how she wrote it. It comes from her warm feelings about her Mum and Dad and from learning to be alone. ?You must be able to remember being loved if you want to write for children.?

Whew! Against those strictures, how do her own books shape up and how do they come about?

Rosemary Wells knows a lot about where her work comes from and, more importantly as far as she's concerned, why. ?Never ask a writer where her ideas come from,? she says. ?Ask them *why* they come.? This is not just splitting hairs; Wells is curious as to why some people write and draw while others do not. In her own case she is very clear. It is because she has been given two wonderful gifts. She can both write and illustrate. It is because she has those gifts that she does what she does. In this she is aided and abetted by the fact that she had wonderful parents and so can always draw on her own happy childhood. This may seem simplistic and immodest, but Rosemary Wells has no time for

doubting or dallying. If she is immodest she has every right to be so with over twenty books to her credit, in many of which she has created characters who have become household names. If she is simplistic it is because she has genuine belief that enables her to accept and enjoy the situation in which she finds herself.

As to where the specific ideas for her books come from, Rosemary's first answer is a mystical and profoundly fundamentalist one. "Somewhere up there, there is an invisible room full of all the books, all the symphonies, all the paintings and every other created thing. I have been lucky enough to have been given a key to that room. I have a small key which allows me to do my books. Mozart had a much larger key."

When pushed, Rosemary also has some more prosaic and practical answers. Much of the emotion that goes into the stories comes from her own vivid and contented upbringing, and, as a catalyst, she got many of her ideas from observing her own children, although, she emphasises, you cannot just record what you see. Scratch even further and you find that Rosemary (like all serious writers and illustrators) is wholly professional and cerebral about what she does. There is no whimsy about her work. Good ideas may come partly from an invisible room and partly from memory or observation but they must be carefully handled before they make satisfactory works of art. That careful handling comes from two sources as far as Rosemary is concerned. One is her own overwhelming enthusiasm for her work. It is, as she says with conviction, the greatest fun to do and never boring. In addition, she admits to having enormous ambition and great energy, both of which propel her towards new books and keep her working at them. The second reason that her books are as good as they are comes from the advice she gets from her editor, Phyllis Fogelman, to whom she *listens* – a point she is emphatic about.

Rosemary became an author/illustrator while working on layouts and jackets as a book designer for Macmillan publishers in New York. She had been to art school but stayed only a year, disliking the emphasis on the abstract. One weekend she heard "A Song to Sing, O!" from Gilbert and Sullivan's **The Yeoman of the Guard**. She sat down and put together a dummy picture book based on the words of the song which she took in to Susan Hirschman, the children's books editor at Macmillan. Hirschman accepted it immediately with the words "You are now a Macmillan author?". Fairy tale stuff which Rosemary tells utterly straight-faced. She goes on to admit with modesty that there followed a period in which she was "arch and arrogant" because she wasn't listening and wasn't learning. As a result she produced books that were less than her best and which she now dismisses.

It was at this point that she met Phyllis Fogelman and started to create the picture books for which she is now so well known. The artistic influences which she acknowledges are Robert Lawson, N C Wyeth, Beatrix Potter, Tenniel and Dulac, and certainly her style as an illustrator is part of that fine-drawing tradition. Her "Bunny Planet" books reflect the three days Rosemary spent studying the Beatrix Potter watercolours in the Victoria and Albert Museum, an experience she says, which changed her style forever by shifting the emphasis of her work away from its cartoon-like appearance.

But, although her illustrations are such a powerful part of her books, it is really her skill with words and with observing life that define her considerable contribution to children's books. She is a successful writer for teenagers with titles such as **When No One Was Looking**, which was runner-up for the Edgar Allen Poe Award, and **The Man in the Woods**, another tense and tightly plotted thriller and, at all levels, she sees the text as the driving force of a book. "Without a good text a book is nothing." In her writing she has two guiding principles. One on how words are used – "A good work of children's literature should be read aloud 500 times" – ensures that she sees her texts as poetry that must be worked on until they say exactly what they should without wasting any words. The second relates to the content. Rosemary believes that books must be immediately appealing and light with lots of humour to carry their serious message. "Children want to read about things that touch the heart or the funny bone."

Benjamin and Tulip, **Noisy Nora**, **Morris's Disappearing Bag**, **Timothy Goes to School**, **Hazel's Amazing Mother** – all of these and many of Rosemary's other titles certainly live up to that dictate. The ebullient but controlled humour of both the texts and the pictures allow her to include all kinds of messages without ever appearing to preach. The underlying feminism of **Benjamin and Tulip** and **Timothy Goes to School** is a natural part of the stories and comes from within Rosemary not because she has a mission to convey it. Its place in the book is of minor importance compared with the hilarity of Timothy's dislike for Claude, or Violet's for Grace because "She sings. She dances. She

counts up to a thousand and she sits next to me.? How well all readers, young and old, can identify with that sentiment. The intricate dynamics of family life are caught to perfection again and again. There is the companionship of mouse brother and sister in **Stanley and Rhoda** ; the way in which siblings negotiate, not letting anything go without a price in **Morris?s Disappearing Bag** ; and the importance of a mother who can fix impossible situations in **Hazel?s Amazing Mother** (a story based on an incident in which her daughter, Victoria, wore the wrong thing to a Christmas concert and she, Rosemary, realised she would have to intervene). On first impression, the fact that her characters are animals may distract some readers and make it harder for them to see the point of what Rosemary is saying. But, she uses animals for a purpose. ?You can do with animals what you can?t do with children. You can include violence and you can be much funnier.?

Rosemary has thought about all angles of her books. She knows why they come, how they come and has found ways of making them so successful by sheer hard work. Her own books do fulfil the criteria which she demands of books in general. Her witty style of writing, drawing and observing disguise the fervour of her beliefs and commitment from which in life she never lets up.

I think I proved to be not quite such a fool as Rosemary had feared. We covered a lot of ground and I?d listened and learned from her clear and incisive answers. Our allotted time was up. The hair appointment must be kept as Rosemary had the most hectic speaking schedule before her. But still she had things to say. Still talking we strode down the road, still talking she checked in to the hairdresser, still talking she put on an all-covering wrap-around. Instructions to the man with the scissors were made in the midst of a serious account of the woes of American youth. Only the absolute impossibility of continuing against the background of music, the need for Rosemary to keep her head at a certain angle and the difficulty of my knowing how to keep out of the poor ?stylist?s? way, brought our conversation to an end.

Like the best children?s books, Rosemary Wells makes you feel you are more after meeting her than you were before.

Some Rosemary Wells titles:

Benjamin and Tulip , Viking, 0 670 80084 8, £7.99; Puffin, 014 050177 0, £3.50 pbk

Noisy Nora , Picture Lions, 0 00 661465 5, £3.99 pbk

Morris?s Disappearing Bag , Viking, 0 670 80535 1, £6.99; Puffin, 0 14 050319 6, £3.50 pbk

Timothy Goes to School , Viking, 0 670 80020 1, Puffin, 014 050363 3, £2.99 pbk

Hazel?s Amazing Mother , Picture Lions, 0 00 663159 2, £3.99 pbk

Stanley and Rhoda , Picture Lions, 0 00 661807 3,£3.99 pbk

Fritz and the Mess Fairy , HarperCollins, 0 00 193641 7, £7.99; Picture Lions, 0 00 664203 9, £3.99 pbk

Max?s Dragon Shirt , Picture Lions, 0 00 664157 1, £3.50 pbk

The Little Lame Prince , Picture Lions, 0 00 664131 8, £3.99 pbk

Voyage to the Bunny Planet , HarperCollins (miniature slipcase containing three titles), 0 00 193640 9, £9.99

When No One Was Looking and **The Man in the Woods** are out of print.



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