

Author Interviews, Book Resources

## Kate DiCamillo Interview Transcript

By [Kate DiCamillo](#)

*On January 27 and January 28, 2005, Newbery-winning author Kate DiCamillo was interviewed by Scholastic students and teachers. DiCamillo is the author of *Because of Winn-Dixie*, *The Tiger Rising*, and *The Tale of Despereaux*.*

*Below is the transcript for January 27's interview. [Read the transcript](#) for the companion interview on January 28.*

*You can also [read the transcript](#) for an earlier conversation with Kate Camillo in 2003.*

**Hi Kate! Was there ever a time when you felt like you would not make it as a children's book writer?**  
Yes, absolutely. I still worry that I won't make it as a book writer. Everything has happened so quickly and I still can't believe that I make my living as a children's book writer.

**We have a group of 17 parents, second graders and teachers in an evening book club who have all read *Because of Winn-Dixie*. We would like to know what your pictures would look like if you drew some for the book?**

It is hard to think of what the pictures would be like if I could draw since I have no drawing ability at all, and I can't write music. The only art form that is available to me is writing. But I do see everything as I write. I have a very visual image. The writing is the answer to the pictures in my head.

**What is your favorite part in *Winn-Dixie*?**

It's always hard to pick a favorite part, but there is a moment at the end when the preacher says the prayer at the party and that moves me deeply even now. So that would probably be my favorite part.

**What character do you relate best to?**

I love all of those people. If you made me pick a favorite in *Winn-Dixie*, it would probably be Gloria Dump, because I would want to sit in her backyard and tell her my problems.

**Did you ever have a dog like Winn-Dixie?**

No. Winn-Dixie is my idea of the best dog imaginable - stinky, funny, ugly, friendly. I have a part-time dog. I'm actually an aunt to a dog and he's an awful dog, but I love him. He's only interested in doing what he wants to do.

**In the book, Opal's mother left her. Were your parents divorced?**

My parents are separated. My father left when I was six years old.

**Are you going to write a sequel to *Because of Winn-Dixie*? Will Opal's mom ever come back?**

I don't think Opal's mother will come back. Will I ever write a sequel? Probably not.

**How did you come up with the idea for the book?**

The book is a direct result of two things: 1) It was the first time in my life I had been without a dog for an extended amount of time. 2) I wrote the book during the worst winter in Minnesota, and during the worst winter in Minnesota you just want to go back to Florida, which I couldn't afford to do, but I could write a book that would take me there.

**Have you seen the movie? Does it match the images in your head?**

I have seen the movie, and the imagery in the movie is so compelling and beautiful that it has replaced the imagery in my head. I got to work with the director and re-write the script, but the imagery is all the director's (Wayne Wang).

**Why did you choose to be a writer?**

Because I had failed at everything else. I had it in my head when I was in college that I wanted to be a writer, but it took me a long time to commit to being a writer. Up until then, I had worked one dead-end job after another while writing on the side.

**What do you like most about writing?**

"I hate writing. I love having written." (Dorothy Parker) Each day is a struggle to do it, but once I've done it, I'm happy. I'm thrilled.

**How did you first get your work published?**

What happened was I was working in a book warehouse and a Candlewick sales rep came in, and I said that I loved everything that Candlewick does but I can't get in the door there because I don't have an agent and I've never been published. And this sales rep said "If you get me a manuscript, I'll get it to an editor." And that's how it happened.

**What is the most difficult part of the writing process for you?**

Writing a novel isn't like building a brick wall. You don't figure out how to do it and then it gets easier each time because you know what you're doing. With writing a novel you have to figure it out each time. Each time you start over, you just have the language, and the idea and the hope.

**When you get stumped while writing, what do you do?**

You have to start off with the baseline knowledge that you are stumped all the time, and you just make yourself just write all the time, which for me is two pages a day. And they might be two lousy pages that go nowhere. So sometimes you are beating your head against a brick wall and thinking that you are not making any progress, and then the wall gives way.

**When you write a story, and you think you're done, how do you know for sure that you're really done and there's not more information that needs to be answered?**

I never know that I'm done. I just know when it's time to let go because I have this feeling that I can keep on fussing with it, or instead of making it better, I'll make it worse. You have to give up on the idea of making it perfect, and that's what letting it go is about. It will never be perfect.

**Hi, Kate! Do you ever feel that you're not going to be able to finish a book by your deadline?**

Deadline? I don't work with deadlines, I guess. I just work hoping I can tell the story right. It's not like journalism with a deadline. You just want to tell the story right and not have it take up the rest of your life. There are self-imposed deadlines. After all, I don't want to be writing the same story when I'm 90.

**Approximately how long did it take you to write your books?**

*Winn-Dixie* took me about six months. *Tiger Rising* took me about eight months. *Despereaux* took me almost a year. So the more I know, the harder it gets.

**When you write, how much do you think about your readers?**

I only think about telling the story right. I'm always answering to the story and not to the reader.

**Which book of yours do you enjoy most?**

I can't answer that question because to me, my books are like my kids. I love them equally. I see them as deeply flawed but lovable anyway. And I see them as individuals, so it's impossible to choose between them.

**Are you always satisfied with your work?**

I'm never satisfied. But I keep on trying.

**I am going to be giving a presentation on you and your books in my Children's Literature class. Is there any information on upcoming books or interesting facts about yourself that I can share with my class?**

I've got a series of beginning novels coming out which are about a pig named Mercy Watson, and I have another novel coming out in 2006 called *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, and a couple of picture books. I'm short. I'm loud. Do you have any guidelines to answering some interesting facts about myself?

**Your books are so varied. Are you impressed with yourself for having such a wide array or imagination? I am!**

I'm never impressed with myself! I am amazed at how lucky I've been. Because I have been so fortunate, I've been allowed to experiment with different ways of storytelling.

**When you write a book do you get really involved, almost as if you are in the story? Especially the characters, do you feel like they are almost there with you?**

Absolutely. The way I feel about characters is not that I've made them up but that they already exist and that I was lucky to find them. They are very real to me.

**Do you ever use people that you know and convert them into characters in your books?**

No. I haven't at all. I've had names of real people that I know. Sweetie Pie was the name of my babysitter when I was a kid.

**I can't think of any interesting characters. What should I do?**

That's a tough question because with me writing starts with the character. But if you can't think of an interesting character, get on a city bus with a notebook and ride around all day and take notes, look at people, and listen to them. By the end of the day you'll find a character with a story.

**If you see other good writers, do you get discouraged?**

No, if I see other good writers, I get inspired because I think, "I want to be able to write like that."

**When you're writing, where do you write? At your house?**

I write in my house, at my desk where I have Christmas lights strung over it to try and convince me that I'm having a good time. I can't really write anywhere else.

**Where did you get the idea for *Tiger Rising*?**

Tiger Rising came from the character Rob first, and I didn't know what he wanted, I just had him. Then my mom called and told me that a tiger had escaped from the zoo, and that's all I needed. I thought: that boy is waiting for a tiger.

**What is your favorite part of *The Tale of Despereaux*?**

I guess it's when Despereaux forgives his father.

**Are you ever going to write a sequel to *The Tale of Despereaux*? Where Despereaux and Pea go on another quest?**

There is a line in the end of Despereaux that my editor made me put in that sounds like there is a possibility for a sequel. She wanted to make sure we left the door open, and so the door is open. But I haven't felt the urge yet.

**I love the book design of *Tale of Despereaux*, did you decide you wanted it to look like an old fashioned book yourself?**

As a writer, I don't have a whole lot of say about how a book looks, but fortunately the design people at Candlewick are just fabulous, and they decided that it would be like an old fashioned book and they were right.

**What are some of your favorite children's books?**

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*, *Abel's Island*, *The Secret Garden*, *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Ribsy*, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, *Bridge to Terabithia*. But I have different favorites every day. There are just so many books that I have loved.

**Is there a single author that inspired you?**

There have been so many from the adult world and the children's world. From the children's world: Christopher Paul Curtis and Katherine Paterson. From the adult world: Anne Tyler and Isak Dineson.

**Where do you get your inspiration from?**

I get my inspiration from looking at the world and paying attention to people and just looking closely. Also from reading. I get so much inspiration from other authors.

**Do you have any hobbies besides writing?**

I like to eat. Does that count as a hobby? I love to read, and I walk.

**Do you ever go to schools and talk to students?**

I do. I haven't gone a lot recently with everything that was going on with the movies, but I love talking with kids.

**Do you ever feel pressure that you have to write books?**

No, but I'm happier when I have a story.

**How many more books do you think you will write?**

I'm not sure. All I know is that writing is what I'm supposed to do, and I'm lucky because that's what I get to do. I don't know how many books I'll write, just that I will keep on writing.

**Did you always want to write for children?**

I started writing short stories for adults and then I got a job in a book warehouse and I was assigned to the third floor, which was nothing but kids' books. And I started to read those kids' books and thought, "I want to do something like this." I still write for adults, but increasingly I feel like I'm a storyteller and I don't make the distinction on whether I'm telling that story to an adult or a child.

**Since you are a writer, do you respond to fan letters?**

I do, but I don't know how much longer I can keep it up. Right now I'm getting about 100 letters a week.

**Did you always enjoy reading, even as a child?**

Yes. Yes. Yes. I have always been a reader. I was one of those kids desperate to learn. I would read anything.

**What is one thing you think all aspiring authors need to know?**

It's not about you, it's about the story.

**How can someone send you a fan letter? E-mail? Snail mail? Web site?**

You can send it snail mail in care of the publisher, Candlewick Press, and you can find the address in the front of your book.

**We're almost out of time. Ms. DiCamillo, is there anything you would like to add?**

I feel incredibly lucky that I tell stories for a living and I'd like to thank everyone who reads those stories.