

Kate DiCamillo

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

Karen Jaffe:

This is Karen Jaffe, head of the Young Readers Center at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the 14th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will hold evening hours for the first time ever this year in its new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in downtown Washington D.C. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and for more details visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it's my pleasure to introduce author Kate DiCamillo, who's also known as the newest ambassador for young people's literature. Kate is no stranger to the Library of Congress, as she was inaugurated by the librarian of the Library of Congress, James Billington, earlier this year. Hi, Kate.

Kate DiCamillo:

Karen, thank you for that introduction.

Karen Jaffe:

You're very welcome.

Kate DiCamillo:

I am no stranger to the Library of Congress, because I was also there when I was a kid. I remember looking at the contents of Lincoln's pockets.

Karen Jaffe:

Wow.

Kate DiCamillo:

Yeah. That's still on display up there, isn't it?

Karen Jaffe:

That's right. That's right.

Kate DiCamillo:

Yes. It moved me very deeply as an eight-year-old to see what had been in his pockets the night that he died. Okay, I'm ready for all the hard questions, Karen; I know you've got a lot of them.

Karen Jaffe:

Okay. Okay. Well, we know this is your fourth visit to the National Book Festival this summer, and that you will be featuring your newest book, and the Newberry winner for this year, 'Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures.' And you'll be speaking to your fans in the Teen Pavilion. So can you tell us a little bit about the story of Flora and Ulysses?

Kate DiCamillo:

I can, and the more I talk about the story, the stranger I'll sound, but I'll go ahead and try to sum it up. So, it's the story of a girl who loves to read comic books. Her name is Flora, and it's the story of vacuum cleaner, the Ulysses 2000X. And it's the story of a squirrel who gets sucked up in the vacuum cleaner, and thereby becomes a superhero with all of the normal powers that a superhero has: he can fly, he's incredibly strong, and also he, of course, writes poetry. So there you go.

Karen Jaffe:

When you mentioned coming to the library when you were eight, I can't help but think that one of your wonderful attributes is that you are able to go back into the mind of an eight-year-old, or a 10-year-old, or a 12-year-old, as you create these wonderful adventures. How does that work for you?

Kate DiCamillo:

I don't know how I do that. I've come to believe that -- that it is something that I'm capable of. You know, I remember the first time somebody asked me that question. When I -- the first book came out, "Because of Winn-Dixie," and this -- one of the very first interviews I did, this woman said, "Well, tell us. How do you get in the mind of a 10-year-old?" And I was just kind of gob stopped by the question. And I said, "But I was a 10-year-old." And I guess I remember that time so clearly, and even when I was talking to you about being at the Library of Congress as a kid, I remember what it felt like to stand there; I remember what shoes I had on. I had red tennis shoes on. I remember seeing them on the floor of that building. So I don't know; maybe I just remember more. Could that be?

Karen Jaffe:

Yeah. Maybe you have a photographic memory or something. I mean, maybe that's --

Kate DiCamillo:

Well, I wish I had a photographic memory.

Karen Jaffe:

[laughs]

Kate DiCamillo:

That would have helped me in school, but I have -- maybe I have -- I just remember images and feelings, and maybe that's why it's easier for me to tap into it. I don't know.

Karen Jaffe:

Well, we know this is your second Newberry. Your first was in 2004, "The Tale of Despereaux." And your first book, "Because of Winn-Dixie," also was a Newberry Honor book. And both of these books, "Winn-Dixie" and "Despereaux," were made into films. So I'd like to ask, what it is -- what's that experience like; to have something from your writing become another medium reflecting the interpretations and expressions of filmmakers.

Kate DiCamillo:

'Interpretation' is a lovely word, because that is what it is, and you know, I've -- and I talk about the movies quite a bit when I'm out doing readings, because people will raise their hands and go, "How did you feel about things being changed?" And so then I'll say, to the room at large, "How many of you see the story unfold as you're reading a book?" And I would say, probably, 80 percent of the room raises its hand. So that means that we're all seeing our own personal movies in our head as we read a book, which is one of the wonders of reading. So somebody's goes and makes a movie, they're making a movie that's in their head. And so it is an interpretation; it's a translation. And with both films, I was delighted with the result. And with "Winn-Dixie" I worked very closely with Wayne Wang, the director. I actually learned how to write a screenplay, working with him. And with "Tale of Despereaux," it was just kind of this beautiful dream that they constructed without me having to do any work. So both experiences were fabulous.

Karen Jaffe:

Well, I just saw "Winn-Dixie" again a couple nights ago. I loved it. And so I know exactly what you're talking about, having read the book first and then -- and then saw the movie. One of the best things about having Kate DiCamillo at the National Book Festival, by the way, is that not only are you a prolific writer, but you write for many different age groups. And we know you have a new book in the wings -- a Mercy Watson series coming out at the end of summer called "Leroy Ninker Saddles Up" and that's for early readers. My question is, you've written picture books and novels and early readers -- is it easy for you to switch audiences for your books?

Kate DiCamillo:

That's an interesting way to say it. I'm still stuck on you calling me prolific, because I feel I move at such a snail's pace. And just today, all day long, I'm still in my pajamas. I've been like laboring over this novel, and I feel like, wow, I wish that I can move faster. I'm just a really slow writer. So I'm relishing the word 'prolific.' Okay, but let me go on. Do I have to think about switching gears? No, because what I do is always just right for the character. So, like with -- when I did the first Mercy Watson's, which are kind of beginning readers, I just -- the language that belonged to that pig was very repetitious and had a certain rhythm to it. And so all I did was tap into the pig's story with those words. And so I don't think about writing for age groups. I just think about telling the story and the language that the story needs. Does that make sense?

Karen Jaffe:

Mm-hm. Do you think -- do you sort of step back at all in looking at your work and say, "Well, I've written, you know, two, three picture books. I want to do another one," or "I -- now I have to do another novel, because I've been doing Mercy Watson's series"? I mean, does any of that factor in?

Kate DiCamillo:

No, I don't -- it -- again, it's all character-based for me. I will say that with the Leroy Ninker books that these are a step up from the Mercy

Watson books as far as reading level goes. They're like -- kind of like a bridge between an easy reader and a novel. And it's all secondary characters from the Mercy Watson series. And I started these books because Candlewick had asked for another Mercy Watson. And so I thought, "Okay, I'll try." They never really ask me, you know, for anything. And I tried, and it was just kind of like I was filling it in. And so I thought, "I don't want to do that." I could do it, but it didn't have any juice in it for me. And so when switched and did a secondary character, made it into a longer story, then all of sudden it was like this door opened up and a whole new world was waiting on the other side. So it's -- I never think I need to do a picture book, or I need to do an easy reader. It's always just tapping into the right character.

Karen Jaffe:

Sounds fun. We can't wait to see it, and we'll be seeing you this summer in Washington; looking forward to it. We'll be hearing from Kate DiCamillo, who will appear on Saturday, August 30th in the Teen Pavilion at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center. Thanks, Kate.

Kate DiCamillo:

I cannot wait to see everybody. Thank you, Karen.

Female Speaker:

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