

Nathan Miller

## INTERVIEW WITH KATE DICAMILLO

Kate DiCamillo, author of the 2004 Newbery Medal-winning novel *The Tale of Despereaux*, has worked at a book distributor, a hot dog stand, and as the announcer repeating the line, “Watch your step, please,” on a ride at Walt Disney World. In the year 2000 her first novel, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, was published to great critical and popular acclaim. A novel about a young Southern girl who befriends a stray dog, DiCamillo’s book was named a Newbery Honor Award recipient and her career received an enviable jumpstart.

*The Tiger Rising*, DiCamillo’s second novel, took a turn into even darker territory in mood and subject matter. As with *Winn-Dixie*, DiCamillo again explored subjects involving emotionally neglected children and absent parents, this time in an even more ominous and symbolic tone as a young Southern boy discovers a caged tiger behind a local motel. The book was named a finalist for a National Book Award, although critical reviews were mixed. One thing that’s plainly clear to anyone who spends any time with Kate DiCamillo is that mixed critical reviews mean little to her. She is a storyteller first and foremost, determined to remain true to the story unfolding deep within her without worrying about marketing, critics, or awards.

With the recognition and media attention the Newbery Medal has brought her, DiCamillo must also brace herself for a new round of increased interest when the popular *Because of Winn-Dixie* premieres as a major film adaptation in late summer of 2004.

Considering these events, one might expect to sit down with a frazzled woman at her wit’s end. Or perhaps a writer who’s hit the big time and will remind you of that success repeatedly. Instead, as I sit in a coffee shop in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis with jazz saxophone tunes piped in over several speakers, I encounter a woman who has hit the big time, but wears it with grace and humility.

**Miller:** How has winning the Newbery Medal for *The Tale of Despereaux* changed life for you?

**DiCamillo:** I was prepared better than I would have been if *Winn-Dixie* hadn’t done so well. That was kind of a primer. *Winn-Dixie*’s success certainly had an impact on my ability to write. It took me a long time to turn away from wanting people’s approval and go back to doing the work I was supposed to do. It’s too soon to say if it’s (the Newbery Award) going to have a detrimental impact, but at least the book will always be in print. That’s the payoff. Maybe if I were a normal, well-adjusted person, I would think, “I’m free now. I can write anything I want to write.” But I don’t think I’m a normal, well-adjusted person.

**Miller:** Since you just made reference to *Because of Winn-Dixie*, let’s talk about the upcoming movie. What was it like to visit the set?

**DiCamillo:** Surreal. Well, you know, it was Louisiana, so there weren't a whole lot of places to stay in Napoleonville. As a matter of fact, there was no place to stay, so we stayed in Thibodaux, about thirty miles away. My editor and I drove to the set the next morning. As we came into town, we were like, "Oh, is this the right place?" Then we saw this huge old building with a Litmus Lozenge logo they'd designed, so I was kind of weepy then. When we got onto the set, Dave Matthews was singing the song to Opal he had written. That was it – I just sat there and cried. Wayne Wang, the director, held my hand. Neither one of us is a demonstrative person – but he was moved that I was moved, because it's his baby now, it's his art. It's an amazing thing.

**Miller:** What does it feel like to have something that was so much a part of your life for so long handed over to someone else?

**DiCamillo:** The weird thing is that once it's out in the world it stops being yours anyway. I mean, it's mine until someone else reads it. The book had been popular for a while before the film was made, so I was used to people making it theirs. That's ultimately what you hope for when you write: that it becomes the reader's own intense experience. So it was interesting, because I worked on the rewrite, how a different art form demands a different story. You know, there's always that lament about "it's not the book," but it can't be the book because the medium won't allow for it. It can *feel* like the book, and that's what happens when somebody does a really good job. Because of Wayne, it's going to feel like the book.

**Miller:** I came across a story about how *Winn-Dixie* started out with you hearing Opal's voice, and she pretty much told you the story.

**DiCamillo:** I heard her voice that night before I went to sleep. I heard a Southern girl's voice saying, "I have a dog named Winn-Dixie." I'd been writing long enough at that point to know that you don't treat those moments lightly. So I put aside what I was working on the next morning and started with that one sentence. Now, to say that I heard her voice as I wrote the whole thing, that's bullshit. But I give a different answer every time. I know it started with that one sentence; I know I heard a voice that one time, and after that it was a story that wrote itself. They don't all write themselves. Some of them struggle mightily and if you're lucky it seems natural. But this is one that just unfolded in a beautiful way, which has nothing to do with me other than me sitting down and showing up.

**Miller:** With that character in particular sparking what has become a very successful book, is that going to be one of the trickiest aspects of seeing this film? Do you have a specific vision in mind of Opal?

**DiCamillo:** It's funny because everybody always says I'm a visual writer, and I certainly see things, but I never could have described anybody. I couldn't tell you what the preacher's face looks like; I couldn't tell you what Opal's face looks like. I don't see it in that kind of way. Now the Opal that Wayne has picked has replaced whatever fuzzy Opal was in my mind.

**Miller:** Let's talk about your writing process.

**DiCamillo:** I started where I think a lot of people start, which is short stories, with the mistaken notion that they're short – therefore they're easy – when in fact they're the most difficult things to write. I started by writing two pages a day, and that's still what I hold to. I typically write a first draft of a story or a novel in single space, nutso-form, not allowing much for spelling or punctuation. I always think of it as getting a rough map down.

I put that draft away and let it sit for two weeks to a month; then I come back and write a second draft, again adhering to two pages a day, but now it's double-spaced pages because I want to take a bit more time to make that second draft marginally better than the first. It's usually four or five drafts before something makes much sense and can be shared with somebody and I can get feedback on it. Usually by the time any book or story is done, it's eight drafts at least.

When I talk to people about writing, I always emphasize that I don't think it has a whole lot to do with talent. I've read so many interviews in which the same idea keeps popping up over and over again, that these writers – who are now at the point when somebody is interested in their craft – aren't the best writers in their class. They know they aren't the most talented. The most talented ones often fall to the wayside, so it's the persistence, the ability to discipline yourself, and the desire to want to do it, I think, that matter. I know I have had the experience of being in a class with others who were obviously more talented, more touched-by-God kinds of writers than I was, but they weren't willing to do the work and to make the daily compromises. The compromises go all the way through the publishing process.

**Miller:** So, you still hold to two pages a day?

**DiCamillo:** I do, and it's not much, but I think that's exactly why it's worked for me. The goal is so manageable I get it done. For a long time I did it when I was working full time before I left to go to work in the morning, and that was a really doable goal. Did I want to get out of bed in the morning before I went to work and write? No, but once I did it, the rest of the day was like the real work was done and everything else was downhill from here. I had lots of people telling me I'd never get anywhere writing two pages a day. Put that in there: *many many* people.

**Miller:** I don't mean to make too much of this routine of yours, but the two pages... is that two pages and nothing else? Or is that a minimum?

**DiCamillo:** No. It's very rare that I'll do more than two pages in rough draft anything, even when it's going well, because I subscribe to the Hemingway notion of "Be nice to the you that's going to exist tomorrow." If you're in a place where it's going well, then it makes it easier to pick it up again the next day. When I'm in the final throes of getting something ready, and it's almost done, I'll do multiple sessions in a day. Now that I'm working for myself, I do those two original pages in the morning, and I'll work on something else in the afternoon. The bar is even lower – one page, or edit one page –

because now I'm a cottage industry. I have to book myself and all that kind of stuff, so that takes up a great part of the day.

**Miller:** I'm a little unsure how to word this, because I don't want to make it sound like there's anything wrong with –

**DiCamillo:** With children's literature.

**Miller:** Right. Do you ever feel pressured, or do you ever feel urges of your own that you want to branch out even more?

**DiCamillo:** I still write short stories for adults. The publishing industry is, well, the ghetto is children's literature, and then there's adult literature. You can go backwards very easily. It's hard not to get offended with that question, so it's good you hesitated with it. Increasingly, though, I think of myself as a storyteller, so I hate the notion that I'm only writing for one audience, and I also hate the implication that this is just a stepping stone to real writing because children are actually a tougher audience to write for than adults. I'm redefining how I think of what I do, so I'm just writing stories and letting other people decide how they're being marketed and whom they're being marketed to. I'd like someday to write an adult novel. I'd like to do an original screenplay. I've got all this stuff in my head, all these things I'd like to do.

**Miller:** My wife and I have been joking about how she should be here interviewing you instead of me. She's an elementary teacher and has loved and taught your books for years. Meanwhile, I've had very little to do with children's literature. My defense to her is that I loved your story in *Water~Stone Review* last year.

**DiCamillo:** When I first moved here and got a job at The Bookman<sup>1</sup>, I ended up on the third floor with all the kids' books. I had the whole literate adult thing, thinking this is kids' literature – there's nothing here I'm interested in. Only by virtue of that constant contact with it did I start to change my mind, so I think that bias runs deep. It's changing a bit because of Harry Potter, because of money. Like, "Oh, wait a minute, this is making a lot of money. Maybe kids' literature is okay."

**Miller:** When I picked up *The Tale of Despereaux*, it was the first time I've read a children's book from the viewpoint of an adult who is thinking very carefully about the art of writing. There's a lot more sophistication in your book than most adults would guess, unless they have read the book themselves.

**DiCamillo:** It's one of those wonderful things that happen when you write, where the writing is smarter than you are, and I can see stuff in there that I didn't intend or didn't consciously put in, but there is a depth that is wiser than me. The book is a testament to the power of story. I think any good story taps into the collective unconsciousness. And that happened to me with *Despereaux*. I've had people tell me,

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<sup>1</sup> The Bookman was a publishing distribution warehouse in Minneapolis that is no longer in operation.

“Oh, that’s cute. That was a really joyful story.” And I think it’s a really dark story. There’s a lot of depth and darkness to it, more than in me. The story knew what it wanted to do, and it’s always that question for me of getting out of the way of that thing that’s smarter than me, not trying to control it, letting me serve it rather than vice versa.

**Miller:** The testament to storytelling, I think, is what moved me the most about the book.

**DiCamillo:** It would, because you’re a writer, too.

**Miller:** By the time I got to the end, I’d become so enamored with this narrative voice that’s constantly addressing the reader directly, and then to come to that coda at the end that adds such a nice finishing touch...

**DiCamillo:** I literally went down on my knees, which makes me sound like a nut, but I didn’t know how I was going to pull it all together. Then that coda popped out, and I was like, “Thank you, Jesus,” because I didn’t know where it came from.

**Miller:** I want to talk about some common themes in your three novels. What I keep hearing, when people are reviewing your books and talking about your work, is this constant of a child protagonist dealing with the loss of a parent, the betrayal of a parent, or both. Is that something you consciously set out to explore?

**DiCamillo:** Certainly not consciously, but that’s the way it is with every book. I can see what’s in there after I’m done and why it’s there, but I’m never aware of why it’s there when I’m doing it. I grew up in a single-parent home, so I think that’s why it keeps popping up. I even started into *Despereaux* thinking “Whatever you do, let’s have some really swell parents who don’t kick the bucket.” It didn’t matter what I consciously wanted to bring to bear – it came out anyway. You’ve got one piece-of-work mother and two dead mothers, so not only did I not fix it, I made it worse. Loss obsesses me on a subconscious level, so each story seems to be a different examination of that.

**Miller:** There’s something to be said for including redemption, though.

**DiCamillo:** That’s there in every story, too, yeah. Even in *The Tiger Rising*, which is a really dark book – I’ve been called to task for that a lot – I think there’s a great deal of redemption there. Loss, redemption, and learning to live in an imperfect world and finding joy in it, anyway – those things pop up again and again. Loss is the predominant one.

**Miller:** And this is something you don’t think about consciously? It’s always a product of the story being told?

**DiCamillo:** Yeah, it’s always the story, and it’s not usually until way past galley-stage that I realize what I was unconsciously doing. Unconsciously. That’s good. She was passed out at the computer, but her hands were still moving. I think it’s dangerous to

know. The more I know, and the more those themes are pointed out to me, the harder it is to write. *Winn-Dixie* was certainly the easiest book because I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't have any themes to "not-put-in-the-book-this-time."

**Miller:** Are you creating more of a challenge for yourself with each book that comes out?

**DiCamillo:** I always think of it as bringing myself into the abyss each time. When I'm terrified, I know that I'm telling the right story. It's that terrible thing, too, of people wanting the same thing from you over and over again. That was the hard thing to get past with *Winn-Dixie*. "We want another book like that." You ain't gonna get another book like that because then there's no point in doing it. I might as well be working in a factory if I'm going to keep producing the same thing over and over again.

**Miller:** So, no sequels?

**DiCamillo:** Not unless I get really really poor. I always think of *Airplane!*, the movie, with the Rocky poster in the background of one scene, Rocky 85, with this rained old man with no teeth and boxing gloves on. That's the vision that always pops into my head when somebody says "a sequel." That, combined with a vision of me at 70, at a county fair with a lot of rouge on coming out on stage and saying, "My name's India Opal Buloni. Last summer my daddy, the preacher, sent me to the store for a box of macaroni-and-cheese, some white rice, and two tomatoes and I came back with a dog." Doing the county fair circuit to make a living. I'll go back to working at a bookstore and having no money before I stoop to that. It's like being Peter Frampton and playing at a casino, you know?

**Miller:** How do you keep up with kids' interests and voices?

**DiCamillo:** It doesn't even cross my mind. I guess if you were writing young adult fiction, and it was contemporary, then you'd need to know, but I think it's dangerous to always think about whom you're writing for, because the only person you can really effectively write for is yourself. As soon as you start thinking, "I need to write this in this way in order to sell it," then that's a dangerous, slippery slope. Because you're never going to be able to write to the market.

**Miller:** What are you reading right now?

**DiCamillo:** I'm reading *The Best New Stories from the South*, an anthology I love that comes out every year. At the same time, as a curious juxtaposition, I'm reading *Stories from the Modern South*, an old Penguin anthology from the 1980s, so it's got some of the die-hards in there, like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. It's interesting to see what people can do with the short story, how it's changed, and how that region has changed. So those two story collections, and a bad novel I won't tell you the name of, and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which is really interesting, too.

**Miller:** To say you've accomplished a lot would be a horribly dull understatement, but you have. On your ideal to-do list, what would you like to accomplish in the future?

**DiCamillo:** I want to accomplish: an original screenplay, a young adult novel, a collection of short stories for adults. I want to learn to sculpt and to play the guitar. I want to make snake bite kit art like Truman Capote was wont to do. I want, I want, I want, as Henderson the Rain King said.

**Miller:** Is there anything else I haven't asked about that you'd like to cover?

**DiCamillo:** I want to mention how much love matters. And connections. Whatever gets your work out of the slush pile and to the right place at the right time. Persistence matters. Getting the lucky break matters. Otherwise, you can spend your life in the trenches. It doesn't matter how hard you work – you can write your whole life and never get published. Good fortune matters.

**Miller:** How many rejection letters have you received?

**DiCamillo:** Four hundred-seventy and counting.