



NEWBERY MEDAL AUTHOR

# KATE DiCAMILLO

Kate DiCamillo is a much-loved author of children's and young adult literature. Her body of work includes short stories, picture books, chapter books for emerging readers, and novels. Known for her unforgettable tales of friendship, forgiveness, redemption, and hope, she has received the Newbery Medal and is a New York Times best-selling author. A petite introvert with an exuberant laugh, Kate DiCamillo shares with Mackin's Amy Meythaler how it all began and what to expect from her in the future.



*Kate, 7 year's old*

## TRAVELING THE PATH OF UNCERTAINTY

**Were you one of those people who, from childhood, always wanted to be a writer?**

As a kid, to say I was passionate about reading is probably an understatement. As a child, though, I never remember meeting an author. I just did not make the cognitive leap between something I loved so much, the book, and it being something a human being did. Actually, I wanted to be a veterinarian until I realized I had no stomach for it and it was very science heavy. I'm not so good with science.

After age 10, I never really thought about doing or being anything until I went to college as an English major.

I remember taking a final exam and thinking instead about the question everyone had been asking me: what are you going to do with an English degree? I realized I had no answer and thought, "What *am* I going to do with an English degree?" And now, here I am.

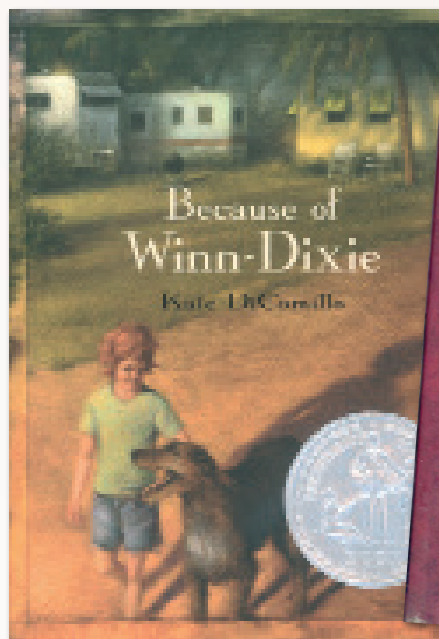
**You were born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and were raised in Clermont, Florida. What brought you to Minneapolis, Minnesota?**

I've been in Minnesota since 1994. I had just turned 30 and was in a rut in every possible way. Since I was about 21, I had talked about being a writer and had been calling myself a writer, but I was not writing. Also, I had been dating the same guy off and on for almost a decade. One of my best friends was from Minneapolis, was moving back, and needed a roommate. So I thought, "I'll just go." (I also thought I'd teach the guy I was dating a lesson.) I'd never been here. I didn't have a job. I didn't have socks. I didn't have a winter coat. None of my reasons were very good, but it turned out to be the best thing that I ever did. I love it here.

**Has living in different parts of the country affected your writing?**

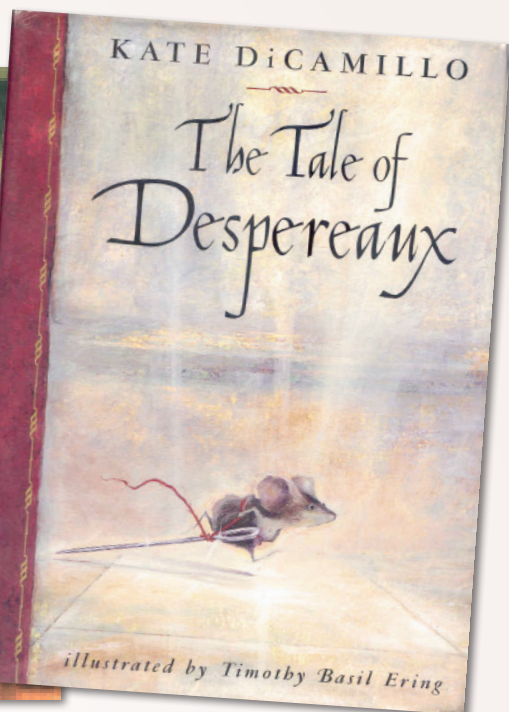
Definitely! I was introduced to children's books here. Also, the move to Minnesota prompted me to write about home: I wouldn't have written *Because of Winn-Dixie* if I hadn't moved. The whole passage for me was fraught with stupidity and blindness. I didn't know what I was doing, but I don't regret anything that happened. I feel like I've been the luckiest person in the world.

**How were you introduced to the children's literature genre?**



When I moved to Minneapolis, the first job I got was in a coffee shop. I could see that I wasn't going to be very good at it. Later, I was looking at the Sunday newspaper when I saw an ad for a job at the Bookmen, a small family-owned book distribution company. I remember saying to a friend, "Look at this! I would do this job for free." I went down, applied, and was hired as a picker. I was assigned to the third floor, which was all kids' books; all day I went around filling orders from a computer printout to take down to the shipping department.

I have to say I loved it. I was around books and around people who loved to read books and to talk about books. Then, there was this free education: I just started reading what I was picking off the shelves, and I fell in love with the form. The first thing I read was *The Watsons Go to Birmingham — 1963*, and I thought, "I want to do something like this." That place was a great gift for me.



**Is that where you were discovered by Candlewick?**

Yes. The Bookmen was open to teachers, librarians, and other bookstore people. But once a year, publisher representatives would come in for a sale. At a sale one year, I was writing up an order for someone and I asked where she was from. When she said, "Candlewick," I told her that I loved everything Candlewick does but I couldn't get in the door because I had never been published and didn't have an agent. She told me that if I gave her a manuscript, she would get it to an editor. Bless her! She was pregnant, had a toddler in tow, and had a terrible cold, but she still took the time to say that and to follow through.

## FEELING THE PRESSURE OF SUCCESS

**You have won numerous awards for your writing and have had films and a video game created based on your books. Is everything you write successful or have you ever experienced the rejection of a manuscript or an idea?**

A lot of what I write never sees the light of day. I do not throw anything I write away, but I can't make most of what I try to do work for one reason or another.

## DIGITAL OR PRINT?

What I want is the book. I have an iPhone with a Kindle app. It is deeply comforting to know I can be somewhere and be bookless and can do an emergency download. It is pleasing to know I can always have a book with me or have access to a book, but the physical book is always what I am drawn to.



# EARLY READING EXPERIENCES

I was one of those kids who read without discretion; I just read because it was a book. The first book that I read was *Little Bear*. I was in first grade and, I don't know if it is an accurate memory, but it seemed that the room was empty. Maybe it was or maybe everything else just fell away. All of a sudden, everything clicked and I understood I was reading ... by myself. I was one of those kids who really wanted to read for a long time. I was slow to come to it but desperate for it.

There was a biography of George Washington Carver that I loved. It was my first overdue fine at the library because I couldn't bear to be without him. I also loved the Beverly Cleary books, *Stuart Little*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Borrowers*, and *Paddington*. I still reread *Paddington* quite a bit to try to figure out how the author did it. *The Borrowers* I reread and can't figure out at all. **They are magic for me even as an adult.**

Before I got published, there were just a ton of rejection letters, somewhere in the range of 400-and-something letters. It was about six years of nothing but rejections, and then everything happened within a six- or seven-month period. First I received the McKnight Artist Fellowship for Writers, then I sold several short stories, and then Candlewick called.

**As a popular and well-respected author, do you feel pressure when you write due to the high expectations of others?**

I feel pressure all the time, anyway, because I'm a neurotic person. But I think back to the time when I worked in the book warehouse and was writing every morning and sending stuff out. Then I had the pressure of thinking, "I could be kidding myself." "No one could ever publish my work." "I might not be able to actually write." That was one kind of worry and doubt sitting on my shoulder, and now there is a different sort of pressure. No matter what I do, worry and doubt are always with me; they are my constant companions. I think just the masks change.

**You were a participating author in the U.S. World Book Night in April. What was that experience like for you?**

I went first to St. Paul because I was going to do a book signing for a group of kids who received *Winn Dixie*. I took along a few of what I was going to give out. I had a hard time passing out books because people would just say they weren't interested and pull back. Later, I went to an adult education center with a

*“I don't write with themes in mind, but there are certain things that I seem to be obsessed with: forgiveness, redemption, friendship, animals, and single-parent homes.”*

friend who volunteers there as a tutor and had no problem. We were done in like 15 minutes. Everybody was thrilled to get the books. It was really a fabulous experience.

## HONING THE CRAFT OF WRITING

**Describe your writing area and writing process.**

My writing area is very barren; there is not a lot on the desk. I have a laptop on the desk. Depending on the stage of writing I'm in, there may be a manuscript to the left. My desk faces a wall, and there is only one thing on the wall: a saint card that a sixth-grade class in a Catholic school in Tennessee sent me. The nun who taught the class said they pray for me and my gift every day. Can you believe that? People are so generous it kills me.

Writing is the first thing I do when I get up in the morning. It's nice and quiet and I'm alone. I'm a morning writer and can't seem to do it any other way. I also think the longer you are up, the more opportunity

you have to talk yourself out of doing something. So I just do my writing before doing anything else. I almost always have music on once I know what music is right for the story. So, a certain CD will be put on until I get to the end of the book.

I write two pages every day. For a first draft, it is single spaced and I write what comes. If it is a revision, I still do two pages but double spaced. I also put a little more time and energy into it. With each draft the story becomes more coherent as I turn more of my conscious brain toward it. Each draft makes me ask more questions and make more demands of myself, but I try not to understand it too much early on.

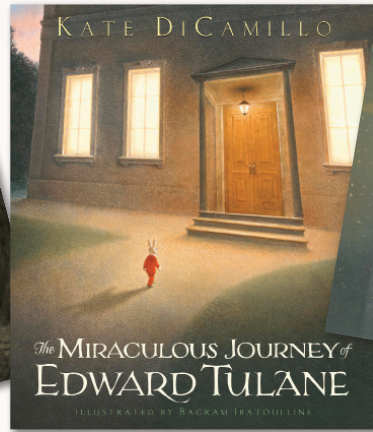
**How long does it take you to develop a book from start to finish?**

A novel typically takes about a year and a half with multiple drafts: eight, nine, or even more.

**What is the inspiration for your characters and themes?**

For each book, I can point to where it came from, but it is still a mystery to me.





With *Edward Tulane*, a good friend gave me a rabbit doll. But that's not really the answer. I just write the story. I don't write with themes in mind, but there are certain things that I seem to be obsessed with: forgiveness, redemption, friendship, animals, and single-parent homes.

**The vocabulary selection and subject matter in your books often are at higher levels than what would be expected in children's literature. Is that intentional?**

I didn't know what I was doing, and I still don't pay a lot of attention to it. I pay attention to the way things sound and the

way they feel and whether they are true for the story or not. I want the language to fit the story. I try not to think about it consciously, I just try to let the language be right with the story. I know it doesn't make me popular to say it, but why can't you go look a word up? That's what I did all the time. If you are going to learn a word, why not learn a good word? A fun word? Fortunately, I've never had a publisher tell me to edit words out or point out that my themes are inconsistent. They just let me go my own way. I'm deeply appreciative of that.

**With the Bink & Gollie series, you worked collaboratively with fellow**

**writer Alison McGhee. What was that experience like?**

Since neither one of us was working on anything, Alison said, "Let's do this!" I didn't know how to work with anyone else, but she insisted. I went over to her house and sat in her office. For about 15 minutes, nothing happened, so I got up to leave. She told me to sit down! Part of the terror is being alone with a blank page. But once we were in it, it was lovely. I just thought Bink-like thoughts and kicked ideas back and forth with Alison.

## MUSINGS

"I've learned to pretend that I'm not shy. And sometimes I even fool myself. But I am still that shy kid who just to ask somebody a question is the end of the world."

"I always have a notebook with me to write down sentences that pop into my head and to write down images that pop into my head. Most of them come to nothing, but every once in a while, one of them is electric. So I just wait for that."

"The first movie made from a book was *Because of Winn-Dixie*. I worked on that screenplay quite a bit. It was fabulous because I didn't know anything about writing a screenplay, so it was like a free education. But with the *Tale of Despereaux*, they had their own screenwriters. I'm always open to whatever happens, but books are where I belong."

"Life is not happily ever after, but it is pretty grand."

"Everybody needs a dictionary. When you look something up online, you don't get to see the derivations and all the other things around it. In an actual dictionary, you bump into stuff that you didn't intend to look for at all. It lets your mind dream. I still have the American Heritage on a shelf right by the computer. It is massive, and it was the one that was in my childhood home, and I love it."





## FUN FACTS

- ▲ She loves pizza and hates pickles
- ▲ She has a special place in her heart for animals
- ▲ She has a part-time dog named Henry that she shares with her good friend
- ▲ She worked on the screenplay for the movie *Because of Winn-Dixie*
- ▲ She would love to meet George Washington Carver and sit with him a bit
- ▲ She thinks libraries and the Humane Society are fantastic
- ▲ She recharges by spending time alone
- ▲ She does not have a television in her house
- ▲ She does not like to type



Kate's part-time dog, Henry



**I couldn't help but notice that Bink resembles another petite blond...**

You never meet the illustrators until after the fact. So when I saw the first *Bink & Gollie*, I said to Tony Fucile, the illustrator, "It was astonishing that you were able to capture me without even knowing me! Astonishing!" (He then reminded me that there are pictures of me all over the Internet.) But it's not only the physical resemblance, either. In the first book

where Bink is struggling to get a roller skate on, the physical and emotional frustration is me all over and back again. And he didn't know that about me! There

were no art instructions to put that in there. He just did an amazing job.

### PEEKING INTO THE UNKNOWN

**I've heard you are superstitious about discussing future projects, but will you give us some hints as to what might be in the works?**

There is one more *Bink & Gollie* book, and there is a novel coming next year. I think I was told to say nothing, but I'll just say it is funny. It might not be funny in the way I want it to be, but I had a lot of fun writing it.

**What about *Mercy Watson*? Is that series complete or are there more adventures to come for Mercy?**

“I think in general, even when kids are older, to have somebody read a story aloud is really powerful. I think it works well with my books.”

## FAN MAIL

Kate welcomes correspondence from her readers. Please direct letters to:

Kate DiCamillo  
c/o Candlewick Press  
99 Dover Street  
Somerville, MA 02144 USA

I love *Mercy*! There is no despair in those books, and no one learns anything either. They are just all relentlessly themselves. And there is a lot of love in there: Mr. and Mrs. Watson love *Mercy* with no expectations. They love her as she is, unconditionally.

I get letters from kids all the time asking what they will read if there are no more *Mercy Watson* books. I don't want to run



it into the ground, but the door is not 110 percent closed. I'm playing around with something, and I'm not sure what will come of it.

**You mentioned that you receive fan mail from parents, teachers, and kids. Do you respond to every letter?**

Candlewick packages up the mail and sends me 15 to 30 letters per week from fans. I like getting them. I have a postcard that I send, and I generally write a small note on there. When the movies came out, there were massive surges of mail and it was hard to keep

up. As long as it stays between 15 and 30 letters, I can read them all and include a personal note.

**How can parents and teachers best use your books with children?**

Read the books together. I get a lot of lovely letters from parents and from teachers who do that. Bless them. It just amazes me that they can find the time to do that, every day they read aloud. I think in general, even when kids are older, to have somebody read a story aloud is really powerful. I think it works well with my books. ▴



## EXCERPT FROM “COMES A PONY”

“Look,” I told her, “I have found an ancient, magical bone.”

Beverly Pagoda was ten years old, and her mother (in what my mother referred to as “a mistake with long-term consequences”) allowed her to wear makeup. Also, Beverly Pagoda owned a pair of white go-go boots with gold fringe tassels. I was forever trying to impress her; I had yet to succeed.

“A magical bone?” Beverly Pagoda said with disdain, but she opened up the screen door and stepped outside. She was wearing purple lipstick. My heart clenched in jealousy.

“Yes,” I said, “magical.” And then in a desperate leap born of imagination (mine was always working overtime) and belief (that something about the bone was special) and desire (to impress the sophisticated Beverly Pagoda), I said, “It makes wishes come true.”

“Right,” said Beverly. “I’m sure.”

“Really,” I said. “Here.”

I held out the bone. She took it from me.

“Put your thumb in that hole. And make a wish out loud, and your wish will come true,” I said.

“Oh, please,” said Beverly. But she put her thumb in the hollow and with her eyes wide open, staring straight at me, she said, “I wish for a pony.”

She blinked her eyes and then she made a big production out of turning her head, first to the right and then to the left. She looked around the yard and out in the street and down the hill; finally, with a sarcastic flourish, she turned and looked behind her, peering into the Pagoda carport.

“Gee,” she said, “that’s funny. I don’t see a pony.”

“Give it back,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, smirking, handing me the bone, “I guess it only works for you.”

“Yes,” I said, “it will work for me.”

And I believed it.

It was summertime. I was eight years old. My heart was a small motor inside me, humming, whirring, eager to prove itself. I had faith, desperation. I believed in magic.

“Watch,” I said. I held the bone in my hand. I put my thumb where it seemed to belong. I closed my eyes. “I wish for a pony,” I said.

I kept my eyes closed.

I listened to the small-appliance whine of the crickets hidden in the bushes and the tall grass.

I waited.

And when I opened my eyes, I looked past Beverly Pagoda, down the hill, to where our street dead-ended into orange groves and honeysuckle vines and overgrowth.

“What’s that?” I said to Beverly.

“What?” she said.

“That,” I said. “There.”

“Where?”

“There,” I said. And I pointed at the pony that was walking out of the orange groves, toward us.

“A pony,” whispered Beverly. And then she shouted it: “A pony! A pony!”

She ran down the hill screaming and whooping.

I followed behind her, more slowly, holding the bone in my hand, stunned, amazed, all powerful.

I had called a pony into being.

I had, finally, impressed Beverly Pagoda.

This is a true story.

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