



WE TALK TO
JACQUELINE
WILSON

Oonagh Turner catches up with the beloved children's author, finding out about her Kingston connections, the upcoming Wimbledon BookFest, and her unique creative writing process

Like many kids of the 90s, I grew up with the words of Dame Jacqueline Wilson guiding me through my awkward early teen years and the accompanying illustrations from Nick Sharratt leaping off the pages and into my imagination.

So speaking to the author I find I myself rather embarrassingly gushing about my extensive childhood collection of her titles. It may be over two decades since her first best seller, but Dame Jacqueline is still churning out children's books to international acclaim, the moving morals and plucky characters seeming to still flow from her with consummate ease and inspiring legions of fans to a lifelong love of literature, myself included.

With a wealth of published titles to her name, and her upcoming book, *We Are The Beaker Girls*, the latest of the cherished Tracey Beaker series in the pipeline, who better than Dame Jacqueline herself as a headliner at this year's Wimbledon BookFest, held annually on Wimbledon Common and welcoming all lovers of literature to readings, lectures and talks, plus film screenings and writing masterclasses.

"I'm delighted to be at the Wimbledon BookFest. I have been there once before and it's just a lovely festival, plus a good venue for me because I am the chancellor of Roehampton University [a principal Festival partner]," says Dame Jacqueline. "I will be running through all the different things I can think of about the new Tracey Beaker book, *We Are The Beaker Girls*, which is about a grown-up Tracey Beaker as written from the perspective of her daughter Jess. In the book, Tracey actually starts to wonder about fostering," she teases. "I'll probably also be talking about some of my other titles. Also, as I've lived in Kingston for many years, and I think most people at the Festival will have been to Kingston – even if it's just to go to the Bentall Centre, I will also talk a bit about what the town used to be like."

Dame Jacqueline was born in Bath in 1945, but spent most of her childhood in Kingston, attending Latchmere Primary School and Coombe Girls'. "Latchmere had a special room with blue fairy lights where you could go if you weren't a running-around-the-playground sort of child, but wanted a quiet place to go and read a book, which I loved."

This 'sort of child' resonates with Dame Jacqueline, who professes to being dubbed Jacky Daydream by a particularly memorable teacher from Coombe Girls' – a nickname she has chosen to interpret affectionately by giving her autobiographical book the title. "I can't blame him for calling me Jacky Daydream because I was a daydreamer. I should have been concentrating but I was so baffled by the explanation of how to do things like fractions I would just go off in a daydream and look out the window and it would infuriate him!"

This dreamy imagination that Dame Jacqueline possessed as a child is something she has been able to harness as an author, but how does she continue to get inside of the mind of a 14-year-old girl in love for the first time, or a young teen whose best friend has just died, or an orphaned teen coping with life in a foster home? "While I generally am the character, I can't be too tied up in myself at that age because obviously times have changed. The hardest thing of all is that almost as soon as old ladies like me catch up with one type of social media, everyone goes onto another. I have to be careful to not try and be too current because my prose would be the equivalent of Dad Dancing. Up to 10 or so, I think I know more or less what kids are into and I think with teenage girls, underneath their exterior, they just worry about the same things I did when I was young - best friends and falling in love and how your parents don't understand you - that never changes."

With her books typically taking on controversial subject matter for kids, including death, relationships, adoption and homelessness, Dame Jacqueline's career has seen her forge almost an agony aunt persona - a testament to the power of her books, but undoubtedly something that comes with responsibility. "I feel tremendously touched if anybody enjoys my books, particularly if they are going through a worrying time. To feel that my books might reassure or divert them from their own problems is lovely. But it is worrying sometimes. Ultimately I have no actual trained knowledge. After writing *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), about a mother who is bipolar, the Institute of Psychiatrists got in touch with me and asked me to address at one of their conferences – all my books are actually made up! But it pleases me to know that they are realistic."

As she reminisces about creating *The Illustrated Mum*, Nick Sharratt's simplistic yet sparkling illustration of this particular character springs to mind, and indeed, Sharratt's drawings have evolved to be of crucial importance to Dame Jacqueline and her readers. "Certainly I feel that part of my success was that Nick did such eye-catching covers - he can express so much. Sometimes authors don't ever get to meet their illustrators but when we first met we got on like a house on fire and we've been a team ever since. He turns up trumps every time."

The initial demographic all grown up then, there is an organically flowing progression and timeline to her books, signified by Dame Jacqueline's arguably most famous and first character creation – Tracey Beaker – finding herself to be a mother with her own child in her latest literary endeavour – *We Are The Beaker Girls*, out this month. Dame Jacqueline speaks about Tracey with a real fondness, and indeed refers to all her characters as 'my girls'. This relationship to her fictional characters is proof of the author's vivid imagination and the love of her craft. "I find making up characters the easiest thing – they all become real to me when I am writing about them. Books are just so much part of my life that I can't imagine life without it. That's why I try so hard to turn children onto reading because it's such a gorgeous thing to do."¹

■ Jacqueline Wilson will be speaking on 11 October 5.15pm-6.15pm at Wimbledon BookFest £15/£12.50 www.wimbledonbookfest.org

JACQUELINE'S BOOKSHELF...



- *Big Sky* by Kate Atkinson "Glorious and gorgeous - I like Jackson Brodie (her detective) so much I've called my dog Jackson."
- *On Chapel Sands* by Laura Cumming "Laura Cumming writes very beautifully and I take real pleasure in the prose."
- *Clock Dance* by Anne Tyler: "One by my favourite author."