

6.10 Childhood Favourites: Jacqueline Wilson

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library, a podcast about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fades out]

Angourie [host]

When you were a kid, did you have an obsession? Maybe it was a book, or a series of books, or a movie, or a TV show, or a video game, or a toy. And you found and devoured all the content you could when it came to your obsession. I had a few obsessions like this. *Harry Potter*, *High School Musical*, Bratz Dolls. But the author I was obsessed with as a kid was Jacqueline Wilson. If you haven't visited The Community Library before, welcome! I'm Angourie, I'm an actor, writer, reader, podcaster, soon-to-be-published author, and I'm on a journey to revisit my childhood favourite books and authors. I have episodes about the books I was reading in 2007 and 2008, but I knew when I set out to do this series that Jacqueline Wilson would need her own episode. If you're unfamiliar with Jacqueline Wilson, she's a British children's author who rose to fame in 1991 with her novel *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, though she'd been consistently publishing novels since 1969. Jacqueline Wilson continues to be prolific, having now published over a hundred books, with *Baby Love* published just last year. She's 77, she's so cool, and my love for her has not faded.

Jacqueline Wilson 101

There are a few things you need to know about Jacqueline Wilson's books to understand why I became so obsessed with them. The first is that between 1991 and 2020, Jacqueline Wilson worked with one illustrator: Nick Sharratt. So all the book covers had the same bright, colourful shapes with simple, bubbly illustrations of the characters. And I say bubbly to describe Nick Sharratt's style because the other illustrator I was familiar with as a child was Quentin Blake, who illustrated all of Roald Dahl's books. If you're familiar with his style, I would describe it as spiky, and his illustrations scared me as a child. But Nick Sharratt uses clean lines, bold colours, and includes minute details like charms on bracelets and labels on bottles. They were the kind of illustrations I just pored over, looking at every single detail. They felt clean and safe, and a style I could easily imitate myself – and you bet I did.

The second thing you must know is that Jacqueline Wilson pretty much only wrote about girls, and I loved this. No matter what Jacqueline Wilson book I picked up, I knew it would be about a girl, and probably a girl I could relate to in one way or another. Her characters were pretty uncomplicated: she wrote about fierce tomboys, or quiet girly-girls, or books about both who are constantly clashing siblings or best friends. She wrote about girls who loved writing, drawing, reading, dancing, acting, singing, all the sorts of things I liked, as well.

But her books were also not always sunshine and rainbows, which is the third thing you have to know. Jacqueline Wilson, I believe, has done so well as a children's author because she writes about children dealing with real-life, grown-up problems. She writes about possessive friendships, divorcing parents, no parents, fraught sibling relationships, death, grief, bullying, and homelessness. So I knew, when I was a kid borrowing her books from the library, that I'd get a story about a girl going through hardships, and I'd probably be able to relate to some, if not all of it.

My Library

I looked through Jacqueline Wilson's oeuvre and if my memory is correct, I've read nineteen of her books. Annoying that it's not an even twenty. I mostly read them from when I was about seven to when I was ten years old. Some stick out more than others – ones I re-read because I owned them, or because I borrowed them from the library again and again. If the library didn't have a Jacqueline Wilson I hadn't read, I borrowed one I had read and liked, and I read it again. I want to take you through a few of my favourite Jacqueline Wilson books from my childhood, and why I loved them.

***Best Friends*, 2003**

Let's begin with the first Jacqueline Wilson novel I owned: *Best Friends*, published in 2003. I don't remember where I got it or who got it for me – maybe it just magically appeared one day. *Best Friends* is about, you guessed it, two best friends named Gemma and Alice. Gemma is a tomboy, constantly being loud and boisterous and getting into scrapes. Alice, on the other hand, is quiet and girly and likes writing in her journal. The novel begins with Alice telling Gemma that her family is moving away, and Gemma is, of course, devastated. They are the bestest of friends, how could they ever be separated? The book tells a sort of coming-of-age story for Gemma: her learning to be ok by herself, making new friends, letting go of jealousy, and generally just becoming less of a menace. Something I remember when I revisit *Best Friends* is how intense Gemma and Alice's friendship is. And I think it's a really accurate representation of the intensity of female friendships. Gemma and Alice, despite being so different, are attached at the hip – so much so that when Alice tells Gemma she's moving away, they attempt running away together. The parents don't really understand why Alice and Gemma are friends – to them, they're complete opposites. But they don't see that Gemma really loves the dainty little charms on Alice's charm bracelet, and Alice has a big imagination which matches Gemma's. The girls see more in each other than what their parents or peers think they are, and the audience gets to see that, too. As much as Jacqueline Wilson writes girls who fit snugly into the categories of quiet vs. loud, she gives them nuance and character growth, as well. It's tricky, when looking back at the books I loved as a child, to determine whether I loved them because I actually connected with the

characters and story, or if I loved them because they were just there. *Best Friends* probably became my favourite not because I wholly related to Gemma or Alice, but because it was the one I had access to 24/7.

Vicky Angel, 2000

I remember when *Vicky Angel* appeared at my library. I was so excited – a Jacqueline Wilson book I hadn't read yet! *Vicky Angel* is about two best friends named Jade and Vicky. Jade is a little timider and quieter than Vicky, who is manipulative and controlling. When Vicky suddenly dies in a car crash, Jade thinks she is finally free, until she finds herself haunted by an angel version of Vicky. Jade has to learn to let go of Vicky, even in death, and start living her own life. It's these sorts of Jacqueline Wilson stories that surprise me upon re-read. I re-read this one a couple of years ago out of curiosity, and I was stunned to find how dark and dramatic Jacqueline Wilson's writing can be. This is not fun supernatural haunting, this is a deep story about death, grief, mental health and healing from trauma. All wrapped up in a children's book with fun illustrations. When I first read *Vicky Angel*, I had similarly fallen victim to a manipulative friendship. Even when this friend wasn't around, I could hear her voice in my head, telling me what I should or shouldn't do. And so *Vicky Angel* was a book I really related to, and a book that inspired me. And revisiting it now reminds me that the problems I had as a child were not trivial. I know when you're a kid something small may seem like the end of the world, but not everything kids go through is small. This friendship had a really big impact on that year of my life, and it wasn't nothing. I love how, in Jacqueline Wilson's stories, young characters are forced to deal with big problems, and even if the parents dismiss them, Jacqueline Wilson never does. She gives her characters space and kindness to work through their problems, without undermining what they're going through.

Candyfloss, 2006

Candyfloss was always at the library. And I borrowed it multiple times. It's about a girl named Floss whose parents are divorced. When her mum decides to move to Australia with her new husband and baby, Floss makes the difficult to decision to stay in England with her dad and help him run his café. At the beginning, Floss is really excited to stay with her dad, but then she realises it might not be the endless holiday she thought it would, and leaving the comforts of a stable home is harder than she thought. This one deals with themes of parentification, money problems, and homelessness. Floss is forced to be a mini adult. She has to emotionally take care of herself and her dad, and help out financially, all the while trying not to reveal the fact that she's struggling. The climax of the book is particularly distressing when Floss's life is endangered. I don't remember if this book resonated with me in a particular way, but I think there is something special about it. Again, it's a really well-told story about a young person dealing with grown-up problems. It's got twists and turns and emotional beats, and Floss becomes her own hero. And I didn't necessarily have to relate to it, the great thing about Jacqueline Wilson is that she always told an engaging story. I was always transported to a new world with realistic characters, and I felt like I knew them.

My Sister Jodie, 2008

I remember when *My Sister Jodie* became available at my local bookshop. I went in with my best friend, who also loved Jacqueline Wilson, and our parents bought us each a copy. I still have this same copy of *My Sister Jodie*: it's travelled with me for fifteen years and I've re-read it probably just as many times. This one, again, was probably only special because I owned it, and therefore had access to it 24/7. I didn't have to wait for it to become available at the library and then give it back after two weeks. But in my mind, *My Sister Jodie* was extra special because it was actually the best. Again, we're following the shy and bookish Pearl and her spunky older sister Jodie – are we seeing a theme here? This time Pearl is the protagonist, and she and her sister get along great, though sometimes loyalties are tested when Jodie gets in trouble with their parents. The story begins when their parents get jobs at a posh yet somewhat dilapidated boarding school in the country, and the whole family moves out there. The family lives in the basement of the gothic castle of a school, and Jodie and Pearl occupy themselves by exploring the grounds with the help of a new friend and summer boarder named Harley.

Now, I'm going to spoil *My Sister Jodie* for you, because it's important to our discussion. If you don't want to be spoiled, you can skip ahead to the conclusion of the episode [22:34]. The big thing about *My Sister Jodie* is that at the end of the book, Jodie dies. This is a big spoiler, but it's also alluded to in the book's blurb: "when the school Fireworks night comes around and a tragic event occurs, Pearl realises quite how much she does need her big sister..." Fireworks night happens in the second-last chapter of the book, a bit far along in the book for it to be in the synopsis, in my opinion. But my guess is that it's there to warn parents that this book isn't going to be all sunshine and rainbows. And it isn't. At all. It's disturbingly macabre.

My Sister Jodie is like a Shakespearean tragedy or a gothic tale. It's set at an isolated, dilapidated castle-like boarding school, with creaky floorboards and locked-off rooms. Though Jodie is bright and spunky, she also loves everything macabre. She is constantly scaring Pearl with her stories about ghosts, ghouls, spiders, blood, and murder. Her stories are so vivid that Pearl always feels like they're real, even though she knows it's just a story. It's like Jodie has magical powers: she can charge stories with such vivid imagery and visceral emotion. One of the first little tales she tells when they arrive at Melchester College is the story of a woman who fell from the topmost tower. But fiction merges with fact when they meet the principal's wife, Mrs Wilberforce, who is in a wheelchair. It's revealed that Mrs Wilberforce did actually fall, though not out of the tower room, only down the stairs from the tower room. Jodie, however, weaves an impressive story: she was scorned on her wedding day, flung herself out of the tower window, and you can still hear the "sad white whispering woman [...] weep[ing] her tower." Jodie's habit of scary storytelling comes to a head when she tells the story of the white whispering woman to the boys' dormitory on Halloween night. The little boys get terribly scared: one of them has a nightmare and wakes everyone up with hysterical screaming, and another gets a fever. As punishment for upsetting the little kids, Jodie must stand in front of the school and say that ghosts aren't real, and she made the story up. But on Fireworks night, she decides to scare them again. She makes her way up to the tower room, dons a white dress and veil, and stands in the window, scaring everyone below and making them really believe in ghosts. When she sees the little ones really crying, though, she opens the window, leans out and tries to take her

veil off to show that it's only her, but it gets caught, she slips, and she tumbles down to her death.

It's awful. And I remember it so vividly. But what I didn't remember is how much foreshadowing there is. Jacqueline Wilson lays the groundwork for Jodie's accident all the way through the book. One of Jodie's pranks she often plays on Pearl to scare her is playing dead. At least twice, Pearl tries to wake her up in the morning and Jodie is limp like a dead body. Pearl gets an awful feeling of dread when they first unlock the door to the tower room, and begs Jodie not to go up there. "I'm sure something terrible's going to happen," she says. But they still go, and when they're up there, Jodie goes right to the window and raises her arms, like she's about to jump. Pearl pulls her back again. And the final bit of foreshadowing, is that there's a family of badgers living on the school grounds, a mother, father, and two badger cubs. One of the badger cubs runs out into the garden and the gardener runs him over with his tractor. This was the most harrowing part for me, even more than Jodie's death, because I'd completely forgotten about it. When Pearl looks at the dying badger, she thinks about his brother, and how awful that he now has no one to play with, and is an only child. There are clues all throughout that something terrible and dark is going to happen, so it's almost not a surprise when Jodie dies.

But there was another surprising theme that I noticed in rereading this book: a theme which we spoke about in my last childhood favourites episode, and that's disability. I mentioned that Mrs Wilberforce is in a wheelchair. Pearl becomes friendly with her, since she loves to read and Mrs Wilberforce has a beautiful personal library. Mrs Wilberforce first recommends Pearl *The Secret Garden*, then *What Katy Did*, and then *Heidi*. In my last episode, I spoke about how *The Secret Garden* and *Heidi*, both books I read as a child, include a character in a wheelchair who got better by the end of the book. *What Katy Did*, which I also read as a child, has a similar story. Katy falls out of a swing and is bedridden for months, while she learns to be good and kind and generous from her cousin Helen, who is in a wheelchair. Mrs Wilberforce asks what Pearl thought of Cousin Helen in *What Katy Did*. And I want to read you this passage from the book:

"She's very ... good." I said lamely.

"She's so good she's sickening. All that rubbish about learning to accept pain! Why should you? And if you're going crazy with despair and misery because your whole life is ruined, why should you have to try extra hard to be sweet and beautiful and uncomplaining?"

"It does seem very unfair," I mumbled.

"And then what happens at the end of the book?" Mrs Wilberforce asked vehemently, as if I'd written it myself.

I shrugged uneasily. "It all ends kind of happily ever after," I said.

"And why's that?" she demanded.

"Because Katy learns to walk again," I whispered.

"Exactly! That's what always happens in storybooks! Katy learns to walk again. Colin learns to walk again. Ah, have you read Heidi?"

Mrs Wilberforce is a really interesting character in this book, because she defies two archetypes: the story of a person in a wheelchair who learns to walk again, and Jodie's story

of a woman who was scorned on her wedding day and flung herself out of her tower room window. Mrs Wilberforce's accident wasn't dramatic, and she doesn't lean into being sweet and beautiful and uncomplaining, and she doesn't learn to walk in the end. *My Sister Jodie*, too, is a book which feels like the beginning of a fable like *What Katy Did*. Jodie is wild and unruly and, as a result, has a terrible accident. But, instead of getting injured and learning to be kind and sweet, Jodie dies, and so her story also defies the convention of the stories Mrs Wilberforce gives Pearl to read.

When I read this book as a kid, I took Jodie's death at face value. It's a sad story. People die in sad stories. That's it. But now, rereading this fifteen years later, my question is: why does Jodie die? Of course her death is foreshadowed throughout the whole book, but that doesn't give us a reason. Maybe she dies because she can't change. Her behaviour gets worse and worse, and she gets more and more out of control. She listens to no one, continues to break rules, convinces herself and Pearl that she's better and cooler than everyone else and doesn't need anyone, but actually, she's lonely and depressed. She dies because there was no other way it could end: she was a high speed train destined to crash if she didn't slow down. I also thought maybe she dies because she wants to. Pearl maintains it was an accident: "She'd slipped in those shoes, she'd lost her balance, she'd fallen." But the newspapers write that Jodie was so bullied and miserable that she committed suicide. I don't think Jodie commits suicide, but I think that, by the end, her rebellious behaviour is driven by a carelessness for her own life. And finally, I thought maybe she needs to die for Pearl's sake. When I was a kid, I thought Jodie was so cool, but upon reread, she's so manipulative of Pearl to the point of being kind of abusive. She makes Pearl tell her everything, and then punishes Pearl with the silent treatment if she doesn't. Jodie's allowed to keep secrets and flirt with boys and have other friends, but if Pearl does any of this, Jodie gets mean and jealous and makes Pearl feel guilty. Pearl is so conscious of placating her sister and staying on her good side. Her loyalty to Jodie doesn't read as sisterly affection, it reads as a hostage situation. And when Jodie dies, Pearl is devastated, of course, but maybe she's finally able to spread her wings and live out of the shadow of her big sister. But then, Jacqueline Wilson leaves us with a final reason for Jodie's death, and it comes to us via Mrs Wilberforce. "Listen, Pearl, listen hard. Terrible things happen by *chance*. We don't make them happen."

I think this speaks to an overarching theme in Jacqueline Wilson's works. Bad things – realistic things – happen to her protagonists, not because they make bad decisions or are bad people, but because of chance. When asked about why she started writing for children, Jacqueline Wilson answered:

"When I was growing up in the 50s, Enid Blyton was the doyenne of children's literature and I enjoyed some of her stories. But I was terribly aware that they were about children from a different background to mine, where money wasn't an issue. Mums and dads weren't often around, but if they were they supported each other and weren't having rows. I grew up in a council flat and my parents had a tense relationship. I used to write solemn little notes to myself in my diary saying that if ever I wrote for children I would write stories that were a realistic portrayal of life."

And though the way Jodie dies is somewhat gothic and fantastical, Pearl's relationship with her sister and Jodie's incorrigible behaviour is very realistic. Jacqueline Wilson says:

"I write about children who are struggling and dealing with difficult things in their lives. But I nearly always try to work things out so that when a child finishes one of my books, he or she can put it down with a happy sigh, rather than being traumatised and in floods of tears. Having said that, one of my books, My Sister Jodie, had a dramatic ending in which Jodie died and I was a bit worried about that, but so many children say it is their favourite."

This is funny to me, because *My Sister Jodie* was my favourite. And I wonder if, with this book, Jacqueline Wilson gave the audience two things: a realistic portrayal of a difficult sibling relationship, and a fantastical piece of gothic fiction. I loved relating to Jacqueline Wilson's characters in books, but there was also something wonderful about the characters I couldn't relate to, because it was an exercise in empathy. She made me imagine situations I'd never been in, and feel it with all my heart. And that's what it was like to read *My Sister Jodie*.

Conclusion

Jacqueline Wilson's books, in my opinion, still hold up today. At least, the ones I've reread. She's careful and understanding with her characters, and she discusses themes pertinent to children's lives. She's writing for her child self growing up in the 50s, wanting to read stories that reflect her own life, but she's also writing for kids today who might not have the vocabulary to express whatever big and difficult they're dealing with. And Jacqueline Wilson gives them that. As much as I loved Enid Blyton growing up, with her perfect families and fantastical journeys, I'm so glad I had Jacqueline Wilson, too.

Outro

Thank you so much for listening to today's episode. If you've missed the other episodes in the childhood favourites series, I'll have them linked in the show notes for you. You can also find them in the "childhood favourites" tab on my website, angourieslibrary.com. If you want to see what I'm reading in real time, you can follow me on Instagram @the_community_library. I'll talk to you in two weeks' time, and until then, I hope you're all keeping safe and healthy and reading great books. Bye!