

Speaking with Kate DiCamillo about *Because of Winn-Dixie: A Hymn of Praise to Dogs, Friendship, and the South*

❖— Kate DiCamillo wrote *Because of Winn-Dixie*, her acclaimed first novel (Newbery Award–winner Karen Hesse calls it “the best kind of down-home literary treat”) at the tail end of one of the worst winters on record in Minnesota. “I was,” says the author, “terribly homesick for the warmth of Florida.”

Born in Philadelphia, Kate DiCamillo moved south when she was five years old. She spent most of her youth there, earning her bachelor’s degree at the University of Florida in Gainesville. “When we moved to central Florida, it was still very much the South,” she says. “And life in the town I grew up in was the quintessence of small-town America.” Her affection for this vanishing way of life is evident in *Because of Winn-Dixie*, published by Candlewick Press. DiCamillo calls her remarkable middle-grade novel a “hymn of praise to dogs, friendship, and the South.”

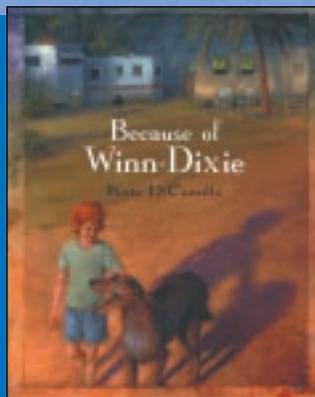
❖— A canine composite

Readers may wonder if Winn-Dixie, the lovable scamp of the title—a big, ugly, suffering dog with a sterling sense of humor—is based on a real canine companion. “When I wrote the novel, I lived here in Minnesota in an apartment where no dogs were allowed. It was the first time I had ever been without a dog in my life. I was suffering from a serious case of ‘dog withdrawal.’” Winn-Dixie, she explains, is a creature of longing, a composite of all the dogs she has known and loved.

In contrast, the other endearing characters in the novel—from ten-year-old Opal to Otis the ex-con—are eccentric figments of her imagination. So how did DiCamillo conjure up what Karen Hesse, author of *Out of the Dust*, calls her “disarmingly engaging protagonist”?

❖— ‘I have a dog named Winn-Dixie’

“One night, before I went to sleep, I heard this little girl’s voice (with a Southern accent) say, ‘I have a dog named Winn-Dixie.’ When I woke up the next morning, the voice was still talking, and I started writing down what India Opal Buloni was telling me. Nothing I’ve written before or since has come so easily,” says DiCamillo. “It was, from beginning to end, pure pleasure.”



“Take one disarmingly engaging protagonist and put her in the company of a tenderly rendered canine, and you’ve got yourself a recipe for the best kind of down-home literary treat. Kate DiCamillo’s voice in *Because of Winn-Dixie* should carry from the steamy, sultry pockets of Florida clear across the miles to enchant young readers everywhere.”

—Karen Hesse,
author of the Newbery award-winner *Out of the Dust*

As the novel opens, we learn that Opal’s mother left when she was three years old and that her father, the preacher, won’t talk about it. Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal and her father eventually confront each other about the woman who left them both behind. As poignant as it is funny and genuine, *Because of Winn-Dixie* packs an emotional wallop, perhaps because DiCamillo knows what it means to be the child of an absent parent. “My own father left when I was very young,” she says. “And well into writing the book, it occurred to me that I’d transposed the relationships. It was the father I was mad at, not the mother. I guess it’s fair to say that I’m familiar with Opal’s loss.”

With its small-town Southern venue and vividly realized characters, *Because of Winn-Dixie* invites comparisons to lofty predecessors like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. But these are references this down-to-earth author isn’t completely comfortable with. She laughs nervously, “Harper Lee? Carson McCullers? You’re talking about giants here! These are heroes of mine.”

❖— Humor, heart, and hope

But it’s no exaggeration to say that Kate DiCamillo is an exciting new literary talent. A recipient of the 1998 McKnight Artist Fellowship for Writers, she writes for adults as well as children. Is it difficult to do both? “Gratifying,” she says. “It satisfies me to be able to go ‘dark and light.’ In my mind, a book for children has to offer hope. You have a moral responsibility to make things turn out well.”

And in *Because of Winn-Dixie*, they do—turn out well. Karen Hesse says, “Kate DiCamillo’s voice should carry from the steamy, sultry pockets of Florida clear across the miles to enchant young readers everywhere.” With a voice perfectly pitched to its intended audience, *Because of Winn-Dixie* is a rare blend of humor and heart, a novel that proves—despite weighty arguments to the contrary—that you can go home again.



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