

Interview with Rhiannon Wallace Children's author, and librarian. World Literature SFU Alumni

Interview by Tamanna T

Tamanna: What inspired you to write *Leopold Leotard*? Does it stem from a personal experience or perhaps from a general observation in your surroundings?

Rhiannon: I used to dance when I was little — I did highland dancing. Even though I didn't do many recitals, I did pull inspiration from my experience as a dancer. I also have siblings who did danced when they were younger, so I would go in and watched a lot of dance recitals as an older sister. That was just a very cute image to me. There's always so much personality in those recitals and they're all kind of starting to do their own thing. Like there's always the one kid who really knows all the steps and the another is copying that kid so that was kind of image I had in my mind. But I came up with the idea of the title *Leopold's Leotard* and then from there I started thinking about, like who is this character and why is he wearing

a leotard, and so for the specific story, the title came first. It was a phrase that sounded good together and that's how I was inspired to write the story. And a lot of the inspiration was from watching kids dance, so that's research

T: How did you come up with the story line of the book, and was the writing process straight-forward for you, or was it a more tedious journey?

R: I think that in general kind of broad strokes of the story came pretty fast, which was the scenario in which you would have a child who is wearing a leotard and doesn't like it. And from there I figured out what would the logical response for kids of that age. When I first wrote it, it kind of came out a bit more like a short story — it was longer and there was more detail to it than required for a picture book, so the real challenge was to get that conciseness perfected. I had a lot of

help with that because I was in a class at the time with peer editing in my second degree in library and archives and I was in a class called writing and illustrating. I'm a librarian so that was my training which I worked on but there were a lot of people in the class in the master's in children's literature program who had a lot of knowledge about picture books and how they work. The whole experience was cool! I've always kind of had a passion for children's literature and loved that so much. With this story especially, you don't have that many words to tell the story, so every word in a picture book is important. So, I think that, that kind of training and education around me helped me look at every single small piece of a text and how they all work together helped me kind of think about children's literature differently.

T: Did you work closely with an illustrator to create the picture book and how was that experience?

R: In the end it is very collaborative piece of work but in the process at least the way I experienced it, you don't actually work that closely together. So, it's the publisher and editor who is directly communicating with the illustrator. After my manuscript was

accepted and then they chose an artist, they sent me her information and some of her work and told me this is who we're thinking of.

Once everyone was on board, she went through and did all her own work and I got to see pieces of it in various stages and I could give suggestions but there is also the editor involved, so I didn't directly meet the illustrator until after it was already published, and we were promoting it. The editor is very much the middleman and communicator in this whole process. It was, very collaborative with the publisher as well as the illustrator.

T: Leopold reads as a character that challenges gender norms and the story pertains the notion that clothing should be comfortable regardless of gender. Was challenging these norms your intention while writing the story?

R: I think it was important for it to be a story that challenges stereotypes and norms around gender without making that the focus of the story completely. It's not a story about a child who wants to dance but no one will let him dance because he's a boy. Every character is fine with him dancing. He doesn't dislike the costume because it is a girls

costume, he just doesn't like it because he doesn't find it comfortable and that's all he wants — to be comfortable.

I keep thinking about more stories in the future and to prioritise incorporating challenging norms without too many words, since I don't want it to be the main focus but what still stands out in the underlying story.

Challenging these norms becomes a part of this world and it's nothing unusual to go against what is considered "proper". Leopold doesn't like wearing the leotard for any reason and you don't have to explain it and that should be OK. He likes flowers and dancing and things of that sort, so it doesn't make him connected to any gender, that just makes him who he is. Some of the first feedback when people were reading the advance reader copy was that a lot of people really picked up on the gender elements. He is diligent and persistent and loves dancing. He does everything this teacher tells him and ultimately sometimes artistic expression just must be free. And there's so much value to practicing free artistic expression every day and learning the steps and kind of maybe wearing the costume sometimes that's uncomfortable. At the same time his true passion for it outshines everything else, and that was my main

focus in the story.

T: How would you say writing children's book is different than writing like a fictional novel or short stories?

R: I love writing children's literature and have always been interested in it. Even when I submitted to *The Lyre* a few years ago when I was studying in the World Literature department, I remember my story reading like a children's story. I didn't plan on focusing on this genre, but children's stories have familiarly since I've done is more analytical writing. And it just turned out that way because we analysed different works from different people in school. From that, I learnt a lot. It's a bit different when you compare that to other forms of literature or genre. I am kind of thinking through some ideas for some novels and kind of chapter books for kids and I haven't done a lot of that before, so I want to explore different genres.

Writing a picture book for children reads more like a poem. You're working with a small kind of phenomenon or moment in time. Sometimes picture books are spanning over the years but some kind of idea is necessary and should be small enough to hold within



Cloud Windows by Belle Villar

30 pages. It's sort of a form of artistic expression that's very creative in a very particular way to affirm expression. I want to write different things though, currently what I have in my mind is more of a young adult fiction or possibly sort of older middle grades like maybe 11-to-12-year old's. I want to explore other genres like, fantastical and historical.

T: What sort of impact are you wanting to emit on your audience?

R: I'm hoping, at least with this book, that it brings joy to children, and adds to their happiness. In this way it adds on to my work as a librarian, because I work a lot with kids as well and there are so many kids who want books that are kind of funny and entertaining in that way. Books are so important to them and that's how they learn at that

age, so they learn how to read. This is also how they start thinking about a lot of big ideas too. I would love to keep working directly with kids and different books in the future.

T: So what comes next for you?

R: I graduated from library school and I'm kind of at the beginning of that part of my career that I'm focusing a lot on that right now and I'm doing a lot of work with organizations in that realm around children's literacy and things like. And with an organization I'm part of quill DC which is a group of children's writers and illustrators of BC. Then I'm also part of a section of the BC library association, so I am interested in doing a lot of volunteer work around supporting children and families in BC. In terms of writing, I am working a little bit, like I said on

a chapter book idea, which is more of a realistic fiction about two kids in school. Then I have another idea for a more historical kind of young adult novel as well. Two very different organized genres that I am thinking about. Still working on some ideas for more picture books but I keep kind of going back and forth as I think it would be fun to try and write some things for different ages. It is always good to have different things up there.

T: Is there anything you'd like to share with the students reading this magazine?

R: I was very involved in a lot of school I've just gotten very excited about being involved in like the Lyre and the student union and then also some of the organizations at my grad school and I feel like that is that's giving me like a lot of insight and a lot of opportunities to explore things that I wouldn't have necessarily had just from class. Not that class is also great, still I recommend getting involved. Although, I recognize not everyone has time for that since people must work and people have families to take care of and all these certain wonderful things. I would say if people have time and they are interested in getting involved in those things that

I think it's a really great way to meet people and learn more about what kind of field you're interested in.

T: Do you like when you were working on your stuff while, you were working on something else, for example when you were like at SFU in the department?

R: I mean I guess I wasn't at that time since I wasn't like expecting to be writing something in in children's literature that would be published. That was kind of a shocking surprise to me to have that possibility, but I definitely was interested in writing. And I was interested in kind of like working in something involving literature in some way and so I think that helped me to think about that and definitely gave me skills in terms of being able to like present my work. I would definitely recommend if people want to promote their work please submit pieces to the lyre.

T: Last question, curious to know what is on your to be read list?

R: I just started a book called *The Beatryce Prophecy* by Kate DiCamillo. I'm excited to read the rest. I feel like I've got like some adult books that I've been reading and then also some kids books.