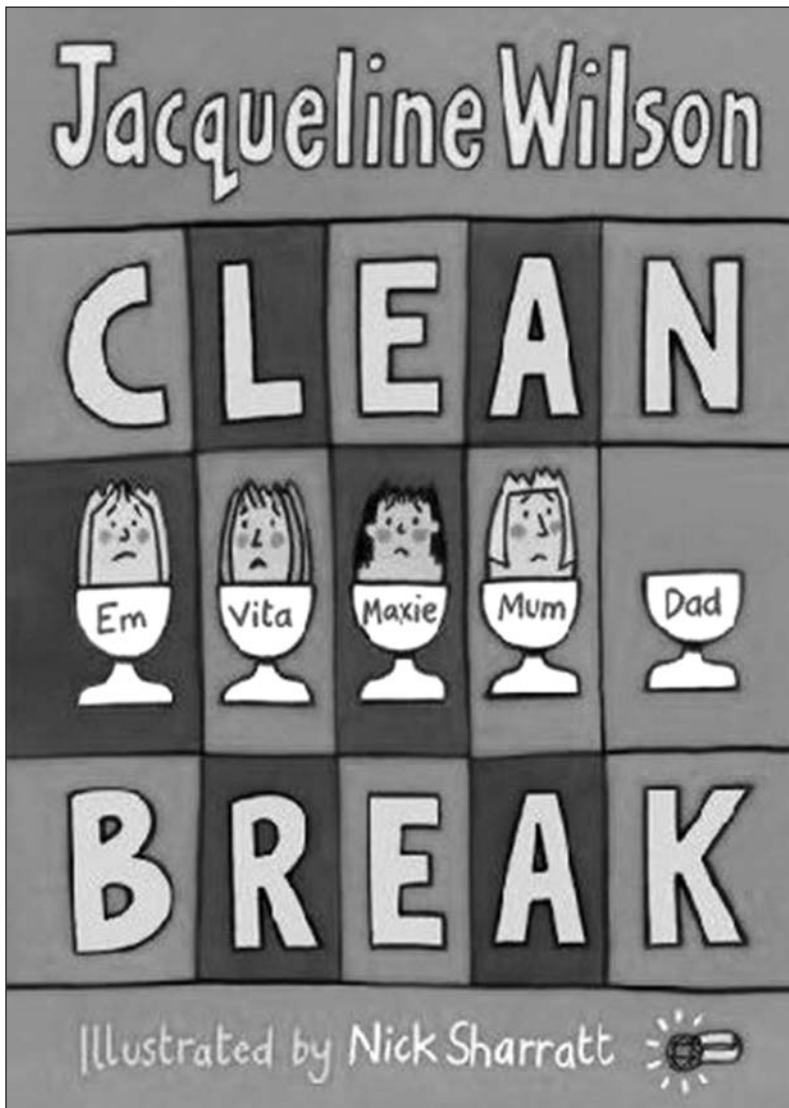


“So good, it’s exhilarating”: The Jacqueline Wilson Phenomenon

by KAY WADDILOVE



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When I ask classes of 11-year-olds about their favourite authors, Jacqueline Wilson’s name invariably tops the list. Since 1991 when *The Story of Tracy Beaker* was published, Wilson’s popularity has steadily increased and in the twenty-first century she has become the most widely-read author by girls between the ages of 8 and 14 years, both in Britain and elsewhere. She has written more than 100 books, of which over 30 million copies have been sold in the UK alone, and her work is translated into 34 different languages. She was the most borrowed author from libraries in the last decade, and in the BBC’s 2003 *The Big Read* poll, four of her titles were voted into the top 100 most popular books in Britain. Thirteen of her books have been adapted as plays for theatre or television since 2002 and *Tracy Beaker* is an ongoing television series. Marketing spin-offs, such as pencil cases, duvet covers, lampshades, diaries, continue to proliferate, and book-signings are a major media event; she is, in the words of the *Independent* newspaper, a “literary superstar.”

Moreover Wilson’s achievement is not measured merely by popularity; since 2000, she has won many independently judged awards, including the Smarties Prize, British Book Awards Book of the Year (twice), Guardian Children’s Fiction Award, and Whitbread Children’s Book of the Year. In 2002 she was awarded an OBE for services to literacy in schools; she was the UK’s fourth Children’s Laureate from 2005 to 2007; and in 2008 she became a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, the first children’s author to be so honoured. She holds “this handful of honorary doctorates” in recognition of her services in and on behalf of children’s literature, and the quality of her work is acknowledged by peers as well as fans.¹ In the words of Philip Pullman, her writing is “So good, it’s exhilarating.”

Ultimately, however, it is the readers who sustain the Wilson phenomenon, ensuring that she remains second only to her friend J.K. Rowling in the book-sales stakes. The bases of Wilson’s appeal are her accessibility, which is linked to her narrative voice, her use of humour, her depiction of ordinary lives, and her determination to tackle issues that children care about. All her books published since the millennium are written in the first person voice of a child narrator, usually the central character. The voice is childlike without being childish and dispenses with any adult reflection, and, in particular, a moralising stance, that would limit the impact of the stories. This subject position of “childness” (Hollindale) ensures that Wilson writes from a simple, yet subtle juvenile point of view which is largely non-judgemental and encourages reader identification. Furthermore, Wilson’s narrators, whatever their problems, tend to be creative writers (*Clean Break*), storytellers (*Hetty Feather*), and artists (*Cookie*). They offer aspirational positions for the reader and, since these talents frequently contribute to an ultimate solution to their problems, empowerment for both protagonist and reader.

Wilson’s use of humor, alongside the realism, is a hallmark of her writing, whether it is a character’s determination to tell jokes (*The Bed and*

Breakfast Star), or, more usually, finding comedy within the situation—wearing the wrong frilly dress to a party (*The Worst Thing about my Sister*), or harbouring absurd fantasies about an absent parent (*The Dare Game*). Her deliberate use of “humour as a way of coping with sad things” is an important aspect of her appeal, as the many online reviews from readers attest.

Her realistic settings and eye for the detail of children’s ordinary lives enables her readers to “cognitively map” (Jameson 347) their social world, even if the circumstances depicted are outside their personal experience. In today’s media-dominated society, children are well aware of the plight of others when families fracture; issues such as domestic violence, neglectful or absent parents, bereavement and serious illness (all depicted in Wilson’s work), are common currency. Exploring such social conundrums through story can offer comfort, and Wilson’s empathy with her readers, as well as ensuring popularity, enables her “to help to gently open their minds”, to such problems, and, if they are affected directly, to “hold out a metaphorical hand...and reflect the situations, anxieties and issues they’re facing in an imaginative way.”

It is, of course, the “situations” in her books that have made Wilson one of the most controversial, as well as popular, authors of the twenty-first century. In addition to the issues mentioned above, she has tackled anorexia (*Girls out Late*), pupil-teacher romance (*Love Lessons*), internet paedophilia (*Girls in Tears*), mental illness (*The Illustrated Mum*), abandonment (*Dustbin Baby*), emotional abuse (*Cookie*) and breast cancer (*Lola Rose*), amongst others. The occasionally vituperative media response to her writing tends to ignore the range of her books and their intended readership. Since the turning-point publication of her forty-first book, *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, which also marked the beginning of her successful partnership with illustrator Nick Sharratt and the creation of a distinctive Wilson “brand,” she has written for three defined age groups; 7-9 years, 9-11 years and 12+ teenage readers. It is the books written for the middle age-range, usually with a ten—or eleven year-old protagonist, which

have caused most of the negative comment, from a predictable *Daily Mail* diatribe, "Children's writers are hugely to blame for loss of innocence" (2008) to politician Ann Widdecombe's criticism of one of Wilson's most acclaimed works (*The Illustrated Mum*) on the basis that the sisters have two different fathers.² Wilson, "a girl for gritty realism," has asserted that her job is "not just to write about what I think will interest children, but to touch on tricky subjects they may have to confront in their lives."

The renowned children's literature commentator, Julia Eccleshare, believes that adult disapproval of Wilson is rooted in unwillingness to accept that childhood isn't necessarily ideal and the need to see a comforting image of childhood in children's books. Judging from Wilson's success, this is evidently not what children want; her readers undoubtedly relish her social realism, because "children do like to read lots of things that have a very strong emotional content. They like to be caught up in things as much as adults do." Moreover Wilson is extremely careful to "resolve situations in a positive way" and her stories of survival in adversity are ultimately balanced with luck, hope and an affirmation of the varied kinds of love that can sustain familial bonds in the most difficult of circumstances.

This empathetic understanding raises Wilson above the ranks of lesser 'issue' writers, and her influence has been crucial in maintaining social realism as a viable genre. Despite the colloquial simplicity of her style, the construction of the books is sophisticated, utilising modernist and post-modernist conventions such as alternative voices (*Little Darlings*, *Secrets*) and unreliable narrators (*Starring Tracy Beaker*) in ways that will habituate readers to literary complexities; Tracy's poignantly unreliable diary, for instance, is counterpointed with her actual reality in Nick Sharratt's illustrations. Wilson also employs metafictional devices to humorous effect; such as the characterisation of Nicola Sharpe, graphic children's book illustrator in *Girls in Tears*, or Em's hero-worship of popular author Jenna Williams in *Clean Break*, whose familiar-sounding plotlines offer any Wilson fan a delightful insider

experience identifying the originals; familiarity with such literary techniques will tend to recruit less experienced readers into membership of the 'reading club'. The reader is also likely to become aware that the concerns expressed by Mrs Marks, Em's teacher, "You girls and your Jenna Williams books... Isn't it time you branched out and read something else" (2005:175) may well be echoed by her own parents or teachers. Yet, as Wilson has credited Enid Blyton as the childhood author who "got me reading fluently", there is no question that she herself, while a far more subtle and self-aware writer, has a similar influence on many previously less-than-committed 21st century readers: "I usually (*sic*) don't like reading but *Dustbin Baby* was awesome" is a typical online comment. This, to Wilson, is "the most worthwhile thing of all" and she encourages the further reading development of her fans with cunning product-placement of her own childhood favourites within her texts; Alcott, Nesbit and Burnett make frequent appearances.

Ultimately Wilson's work can be interpreted as modern bildungsroman; growing up through her characters, readers are empowered by "the story's enchantment" which clearly offers them "rich personal meaning [as they] deal with different problems" (Bettelheim, 17-18). The accolade of a year-long exhibition at Seven Stories, which explores in depth her work and life, affirms her importance in 21st century British children's literature.³ She has demonstrated par excellence that popular literature can address fundamental aspects of society while offering both entertainment and challenge to young readers in their search for identity; doing this, moreover, by means of what an *Independent* newspaper reviewer describes as "a compelling mix of gritty realism and warmth, where the chaos is largely redeemed by love."

Notes:

1. All unattributed quotations in this letter are Jacqueline Wilson's own words, sourced from newspaper articles or online interviews.
2. "These themes should not be promoted for children." (Widdecombe, 2004). It was allegedly as a response to this comment that

Wilson decided to write *The Diamond Girls*, depicting a family with five siblings who have five different fathers.

3. The National UK Centre for Children’s Books. *Daydreams and Diaries: The Story of Jacqueline Wilson* will run until October 2012.

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