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A Conversation With Sarah Withrow

[Dr. Sandy Casey ©2000](#)

The informal conversation between Sarah Withrow and me took place one morning in a Kingston Tim Horton's over cups of coffee (black) with chatter and the clinking of cups as background noise. Sarah's first published book for young adults, *Bat Summer*, was nominated for a 1998 Governor General's Award and won the 1998 Greenwood Twentieth Anniversary First Novel for Children Contest. The novel has been translated into several languages. Forthcoming in the Spring of 2001 will be *The Trick With Magic* (perhaps under a different title) and a third book for young adults, tentatively titled *Goody's Black Sunshine Happiness Party*, is nearing completion.

Sarah has been writing fiction for most of her life, encouraged by her father, a corporate writer and published novelist, and her mother, a school librarian. Besides school assignments she remembers an early novel, written when she was about 10 or 11, titled Sarah's Detective Agency. Encouragement also came from memorable teachers Sarah Sheard during a Toronto high school creative writing course and Janis Rapoport at the University of Toronto. Sarah credits the rigorous journalism program at Ryerson Polytechnic for instilling discipline and the knowledge that the best writing is not about being fancy.

After graduating from Ryerson with a degree in journalism, she took a position as corporate writer; she quit after several years to freelance and write her first novel as an adult, a science fiction work which "now resides in a closet." She returned to corporate writing, quit again, and then moved to Kingston in 1994, partly because the community of writers already established in Kingston was attractive and partly so she wouldn't be tempted to take another well-paying position which would interfere with her own writing. The move to Kingston left her euphoric at the freedom and excitement at finally doing what she had dreamed of for years. However, her fiction does not yet completely support her, so to pay the bills she works afternoons at a Kingston business and teaches creative writing (Writing for Children and Young Adults) at St. Lawrence College in Kingston one evening a week. This employment schedule leaves mornings free to write, generally from 9 a.m. to noon. Sarah notes that she probably needs more time, and that during the course of the day when she is not in front of her computer, she works out her ideas in her head about the characters and the story.

Sarah writes for teenaged females who, she says, lose confidence, "deflate" at about 12 or 13. "Why is this?" she asks. "Where does this come from?" Her female main characters reflect her intention to encourage girls to maintain their personal integrity. The motherless girl in *The Trick With Magic* wants to be like other girls her age with an intact family, while the older, stronger Goody in *Goody's Black Sunshine Happiness Party* is unapologetically herself, living by her own rules. Goody is a strong enough character, in fact, to interrupt Sarah's editing of her second book by demanding to be written about.

Sarah finds writing, even half days, a lonely process and enjoys teaching creative writing to "feed off the excitement of the students" as well as to revisit the bases of writing. As a member of Sarah's creative writing class at St. Lawrence, I have found that her education and experience as a writer translates into an interesting, rigorous class for her enthusiastic students. (A sample of Sarah's advice: "Reread your work and kill your favourite sentence.")

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