

# The BiblioFiles: Jeanne Birdsall

**Premiere date: April 17, 2010**

DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Jeanne Birdsall, author of *The Penderwicks* and its sequel, *The Penderwicks on Gardam Street*.

In *The Penderwicks*, Rosalind, Skye, Jane, Batty, their father, and their dog are off to a rented summer cottage on Arundel, a very grand country estate. The sisters' exploration of the grounds soon leads them to Jeffrey, the only son of Arundel's snooty owner, Mrs. Tifton. Sadly, Jeffrey's summer will end with admission into a military academy, despite his dearest wish to go to music school. The Penderwicks quickly befriend him, and try their best to help him escape his fate.

In the much anticipated second book in the series, *The Penderwicks on Gardam Street*, the family has returned home, and resume their active, loud, chaotic, Penderwick way of life. The girls are horrified when Aunt Claire announces that, after four years of widowerhood, it's time for Mr. Penderwick to begin dating again. They launch the Save Daddy Plan, which involves setting their father up with the most horrible women they can find.

The plots sound simple, but these books are far from it. They are rich with subplots, adventures, and escapades. Each sister has so much character and individuality that you instantly feel yourself being folded into this large family, experiencing all the fun, frustrations, love, tears, camaraderie, rivalry, and quirkiness that is Penderwick.

Both books were New York Times Bestsellers and multiple award winners. *The Penderwicks* won the National Book Award in 2005. In 2009, it was one of just two books that the First Family stuffed into children's backpacks for the United We Serve program. Jeanne Birdsall joins us from North Hampton, Massachusetts. Mrs. Birdsall, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Thank you for having me. And could you please call me Jeanne?

DR. DANA: Sure. I'd like to start with the question that was submitted by Shipress, a homegrown literary group founded by two friends, Nora and Dara, both age 10. They are fans of *The Penderwicks* books and wanted to know what inspired you to write this series.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Oh, so many different things inspired me. But the primary thing-- I guess because it was the first thing-- happened when I was probably nine or 10. And I had fallen in love with the books that Edward Eager wrote-- *Half Magic*, *Magic by the Lake*, *Knight's Castle*-- they're all wonderful books.

And somewhere, I read that Mr. Eager had started writing his books because he had been reading the E. Nesbit books to his son. And when he's gone through all of them, he said, "These books are wonderful. Why aren't people writing more books like this? Now I'm going to have to."

And I had this fantasy of being grown up and telling this story-- that I wrote more books because Mr. Eager hadn't written enough. And that really is the truth. That's where it got started.

And of course, one of the most exciting things that happened to me when these books came out was when someone did compare me to Edward Eager. And even in England, someone even compare me to E. Nesbit. So all my dreams have come true.

DR. DANA: That's wonderful. How long were the characters of the sisters with you before you put them on the page?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: I believe I started putting them on the page as soon as I started thinking about them, but then, that first book took me probably 10 years to write. It was the first book that I ever wrote by myself.

My husband and I tried to write a book together, and doing that-- writing fiction together-- could be very difficult. And so the marriage stayed. We kept the marriage together, but we put the book aside, and I went on to children's books.

And so, since this was the very first book I'd plotted or anything, I had to write the book, but also teach myself how to write at the same time. So, they were with me for a long time during that first book. But they didn't change that much as characters.

Their names changed once. I started out thinking I'd start with more contemporary names, that everybody was being named, and then I got bored with that. I wanted to pick names that maybe everybody hadn't heard all the time. I'm not sure if that answers your question, but it feels like they've been with me all my life. That's hard to parse.

DR. DANA: You wrote the first book when you were in your 40s. What were you doing before you became an author?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Before I was an author, I always had to have what I call normal jobs-- which are nine-to-five jobs-- to support myself. And I did lots of different things, including technical writing, and working in a television studio, and working for TV Guide. But all that time, what I was really doing-- what was most important to me-- was being a photographer.

And I did fairly well. I was selling working galleries. I got into a few museum collections, but it never went where I wanted it to go. And all those years, starting from when I was-- well, I always read-- but all those years I was doing photography, I was still reading and reading and reading, and reading and reading and reading. That was something I started when I was seven or eight, and still do all the time. I always have a couple of books going at once.

So while I was doing the photography, when I look back on it now, it seems to me that I was still training myself to become a writer. By the time I did start to write in my early 40s, I know exactly what my voice was, because of all those years of writing. So I could cut that part out. When you start writing when you're young, finding your voice is one of the first things you had to do, but that was already there.

DR. DANA: Did you say you can read multiple books at one time?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Yeah, not with them both in front of me.

[LAUGHTER]

JEANNE BIRDSALL: But not fiction. I can only have one fiction going at a time, but I often have lots of nonfiction books sitting around that I'll pick up in and peer into.

DR. DANA: I have a large library of children's books. And some are older and they're out of print, and some have been published recently. And I started reading your book, *The Penderwicks*, and my immediate reaction was, "Oh, at last. Someone has captured this feeling of the golden, character-driven classics, but it's set in modern times." It was like someone had given my brain a warm, fuzzy hug. It was wonderful.

And I read that you set out to write this way intentionally. So, can you tell us a little bit more about how you managed to accomplish it?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: How did I manage to accomplish it? Wow.

DR. DANA: If it was intentional, how did you do it?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: I don't know how I did it. I know it's what I wanted to do. I remember telling my husband, very early on, that what I wanted was a book full of characters that people would just want to hang out with-- that they would just want to spend time with. And it really didn't matter that much what they did.

I knew all along that it wasn't going to be an exciting plot. And I don't know-- I think it's just, again, going back to being a reader. When I think about the books that I loved in the past and the ones I love now, it's always about the people. I don't remember the stories that well.

Like, if we talked about *The Borrowers* books, when I was a little girl, I had a crush on Spiller. He was just the kind of bad boy that I could handle at age nine. And I don't really remember. You know, there's a plug that they go down, and there's a gypsy. But I remember Spiller showing up.

And then *The Secret Garden*. *The Secret Garden* doesn't have, really, that much of a story, either. It's about these two children, and how obnoxious they are. And they soften each other up.

DR. DANA: Right. So true.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: I don't know how I did it. I thank you for your description. That makes me feel really good. I think part of the answer about how I did it, is that I still have a very strong, visceral, nine-year-old, 10-year-old reader in me. That part of me that's able to read for what you're talking about is still there. I was never writing for this foreign country called childhood. I was writing for the 10-year-old reader in me who's still very strong, and exists, and is very sure about what she wants.

DR. DANA: This book is full of wonderful, vivid characters, but I'd like to ask you about Rosalind, specifically, because I actually feel a bit sorry for her. She's the most serious, dependable Penderwick. She's basically responsible for all of her siblings, because their mother is dead.

Skye, Jane, and Batty get into all sorts of trouble but, it always seems like Rosalind is the one who has to sort it out and apologize for them. So, in many ways, she's forced to be an adult, even though she's just a kid. I was really intrigued when I read, in an interview, in which you said that she was the hardest character to write. Why is that?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Because I was the younger child. I have one older sister, who didn't like me and did not take care of me. And so I really had nothing to pull from. The three younger sisters, I could figure out what I would have been like at various stages, in terms of the family structure.

But for the oldest sister, I had to do a lot of observing now of older sisters of children I know. My niece, I used a lot. She's 16 now. Kelsey. She has a younger brother. I looked at her a lot because she's a very good older sister.

But I also went back to all those old books. And I always thought that the older sisters often got the short end of the stick. E. Nesbit did that a lot in *The Bastables* series.

The oldest sister was Dora, and she tried to take care of everyone. And the others would make fun of her and give her a hard time. I didn't want to do that. I wanted there to be an older sister-- she was going to have to take on an awful lot, but I wanted the others to be grateful to her for that, and not complain too much.

DR. DANA: Right. I'm wondering if you would be willing to read a passage from your book-- a passage that illustrates the sort of trouble the girls get into when Rosalind's not around.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Oh, and I know it's when you want. The bull one. Sure.

DR. DANA: Right. And if I could just introduce the passage, Jeffrey, the son of the owner of the estate, takes them to see a bull that has, reportedly, gored someone. They can't spot the bull in the field, so they move on.

But Batty, who is four, remains behind, and, quite innocently, enters the field to see if there any horses in it. And, of course, right at that moment, the bull comes back out of the barn. Would you read this passage?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Sure. You're making me enjoy it even more. I love it when you laugh, when you're just describing it.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] It's great.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: "Batty was watching a purple and orange bug when Jane screamed. The bug had fallen off a daisy, and Batty had lain down on her stomach to make sure it landed safely. Batty recognized the scream as Jane's, and as Jane had a habit of screaming more often than Skye, for example, Batty wasn't worried. However, she did look up from the bug.

A bull is so much larger than a bug that at first Batty didn't understand what she was seeing. She looked back down at the bug, who had by now safely scuttled up another daisy stem, then looked back up again, hoping the black monster would be gone. Not only was it still there, it had come a step closer. It was only 15 feet away.

'Nice horsie,' said Batty hopefully.

Now, this bull had never actually gored anyone. It was true that once a tourist had sneaked into the field and dropped his expensive camera in front of the bull, who, quite rightly, stepped on it and smashed it into pieces. But that hasn't been enough of a story for anyone. The first person who told it added a part about the bull scratching the tourist's leg, and the second person who told it turned a scratch into a gouge, and so on, until by the time Cagney repeated this story to Jeffrey, the poor tourist had a gaping stomach wound. When Jeffrey told Jane, he hadn't exaggerated all that much, just changing one doctor to three. Nevertheless, gorer or not, the bull was not sociable, and he particularly didn't like visitors lying in the middle of his favorite daisy patch. It was also possible that he didn't like being called a horsie, because now he shook his horns and stomped his foot at Batty.

Batty knew this was no horse. She suddenly knew lots of things she hadn't known a minute ago, like, she should never have gone under that gate alone, and she should never have disobeyed Rosalind, and she would be a good, dutiful child for the rest of her life if that terrible beast would just stay away from her. For now, she knew she had better just lie very still and wish that Hound were there, and Daddy. Daddy wouldn't let anything hurt her. Oh, Daddy. Oh, Hound. Oh, somebody, please help her.

To Batty's very great relief, a moment later help was on its way, heralded by the noises Jane was making as she ran at Olympian speed along the top of the wall toward the wooden gate. The noises weren't exactly shrieks, or shouts, either; they were more like the sound a fire truck would make if it was trying to speak. It wasn't until Jane reached the gate and skidded to a halt -- still on top of the wall -- that anything she was saying made sense to Batty.

**'BULL! BULL! UP HERE, UP HERE! LEAVE HER ALONE!'**

The bull swung around toward the wall, and Batty dared to raise their head and look at Jane, who was jumping up and down and waving her arms around like she was directing traffic.

YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT, YOU MEAN OLD BULL, PICK ON SOMEBODY YOUR OWN SIZE!' screeched Jane.

Then, Batty heard what she hoped was more help coming from the other side of the gate, though mostly it sounded like Skye and Jeffrey arguing with each other. A moment later, however, Jeffrey did slide under the gate with Skye right behind him.

STAY STILL, BATTY, RESCUE IS NIGH!' yelled Jane.

Nervously wondering what *nigh* meant, Batty watched as Jeffrey and Skye raced across the field. They had split apart. Skye was coming toward Batty. Jeffrey was heading straight to the bull.

Jeffrey shouted, 'YAH! YAH! COME AT ME, BULL!'

Poor bull. He had simply wanted to quietly munch daisies in the sunshine, and now his private paradise was full of active and extremely noisy creatures. He hadn't the wits for it. He looked from Jane, to Jeffrey, to Skye, and back to Batty, clearly deciding which to eliminate first. His beady eyes picked on the one closest to him, the one who had dared pick his daisies. He lowered his head and horns and began a lumbering march to Batty.

Batty saw him coming. She made herself as flat as possible, almost a pancake, then closed her eyes and wondered how much it would hurt. Next thing she knew, she was being lifted like a sack of flour and thrown across someone's shoulder. She opened her eyes. It was Skye! Skye had gotten to her before the bull!

Now Jeffrey was shouting again, 'TAKE THAT! AND THAT!' and, with each THAT came the sound of a small stone hitting the bull's hindquarters. Jeffrey was drawing the bull's attention to himself so that Skye could get away with Batty. And it was working. The bull was not going to put up with stones being thrown at him, no matter how small. He turned to face this new enemy.

From the wall, Jane screamed, 'NOW, SKYE, RUN!'

Carrying Batty, Skye took off at a lopsided run, while the bull pawed the ground and lowered his gigantic head at Jeffrey. CHARGE!

Batty had never had a hero outside her own family. She had always figured that her father and Rosalind were enough heroes for anyone. But as she bounced crazily, up and down on Skye's shoulder during that wild run to safety, a new hero came into her life. She watched Jeffrey work that bull as though trained from birth as a toreador. This way and that he went -- darting, weaving, spinning, jumping -- always heading away from Skye and Batty. And the bull followed, frantic to rid himself of this exasperating intruder.

Slam! Skye threw Batty to the ground and shoved her under the gate. As Skye started through after, Jane howled at Jeffrey, 'ALL IN FREE, JEFFREY! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!'

In the field, the final race began. Skye struggled to her feet and planted herself at the gate's knothole. Batty stayed on the ground and peered underneath. Jane kept to her perch on top of the wall. All three watched, terrified, as Jeffrey dashed toward them, the bull only yards behind him.

'OH, HURRY, JEFFREY, RUN! JEFFREY, RUN!' came shrilly from three throats.

Closer. Closer. Closer.

In one swift motion, Jeffrey was on the ground, under the gate, and up again. He and Skye each grabbed one of Batty's arms and lifted her up as Jane leapt off the wall.

'Go!' said Jeffrey, and they all took off, just as the bull crashed his great horns into the gate. The gate shook on its hinges and the bull bellowed with rage, but nobody looked back -- they never wanted to see that gate again."

DR. DANA: That's a great passage.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Thank you.

DR. DANA: And I think that, also, it just bonds Jeffrey to the Penderwick sisters. After this, he ceases to be the son of Mrs. Tifton, and he becomes an official Penderwick.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Yeah, I know. He did. Batty names him an official Penderwick. It isn't really easy for Skye to make friends. I knew they had to go through some dramatic thing together, in order for her to let down her guard.

DR. DANA: In your second book, *The Penderwicks on Gardam Street*, we meet, for just one chapter, the girls' mother. And I feel it's an incredibly sad chapter, because it takes place in the hospital, right before she dies. The first book was so lighthearted. Why did you decide to start your second book with their mother's death?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: I started there because I was going to end with them getting a really good stepmother. So, this book was a story where the most important arc was the family's arc. The very first book, as you said-- the most important story was that the girls rescued Jeffrey and brought him into the family, because he's going to be a very important, ongoing character throughout the whole series.

But in the second book, really, the next step was for the family to find some closure over their mother's death. And I actually did that, mostly for Rosalind. I wanted Rosalind, before she got too much older, to be released a little bit. And so, that's why I literally release her in the third book. It's the first time that she goes off on her own for two weeks with her friend, Anna, and doesn't have anybody to take care of.

DR. DANA: Mmm.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: I felt that was very important for all of them-- for the girls more than for Mr. Penderwick-- that they get a great stepmother in there, who's going to help them-- not become a substitute mother, but to help them and be a strong woman in the family.

And that story was important for me because I am a stepmother. When I married my husband, his children were in their teens, and I didn't get to help bring them up because they lived in a different state. But they're a huge part of my life now.

The second book, Gardam Street, I dedicated to David, Amy, and Tim. And David and Amy are my stepchildren. And Tim is Amy's husband.

DR. DANA: Oh.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: So that story was important for me to tell, to thank the family that took me in.

DR. DANA: Hmm.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: I'm not sure if that answered your question. You wanted to know why I started with the death. And I think it was because them accepting Iantha wouldn't have been as important as it was, if you haven't really seen right, at the beginning, what their mother meant to them.

DR. DANA: Here's another question from my 10-year-old friends, Nora and Dara. Which character in the book would you most like to be, and which character is closest to how you really are?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Oh, boy. You know, I'll tell you what came into my mind when you said which would I rather be. I've never said this before, but I think I'd rather be Hound than anybody.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] Yes.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: What a life he has.

DR. DANA: I know.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: Oy. I've heard the ones that are most like me-- of the sisters. I'll stick to the sisters. The answer to that question always is-- and I think every author says the same thing-- that every one of the characters has to have something of me to come alive. The ones that are not so successful, probably, have the least amount of me in them. But of the sisters, I think I'm probably the biggest combination of Batty and Skye, emotionally, even though Jane is the writer.

DR. DANA: You are currently finishing up the third book, and you plan to add another two to the series. Can you tell us what's in store for your readers?

JEANNE BIRDSALL: The third book takes place the summer right after Mr. Penderwick and Iantha get married. And he, and Iantha and Ben go to England for a few weeks, for kind of a honeymoon-- which isn't much of a honeymoon with Ben along, but he's too little to stay away.

And Rosalind goes to New Jersey, to be by herself, to give her a break. And Skye, Jane, and Batty go to Maine with Aunt Claire, and that's where the story takes place, up there with the trouble they can get in near an ocean.

In that story, Jeffrey does show up there. Jeffery is in that book, too. He's with them in Maine. And it's a lot of his story again.

After the third book, I'm going to skip a bunch of years. And the fourth book is going to be when Batty is, I think, 11, and Rosalind will already be in college. And Jane and Skye will be in high school. And it will be mostly from Batty and Ben's point of view. So, I will still be telling the story of the older girls, but I won't be writing from their point of view any more.

I'm not going to move up. I'd have to move up, and then have it be a book for older girls, which I'm not doing. This will still be a book for The Penderwicks age range. So we'll know what's happening with those older girls, but it will be from the viewpoint of the younger siblings. And that will be at home.

And then, the next book will jump another several years. And then, they will be back at Arundel-

DR. DANA: Wow.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: --for the last book. By the time I'm done, I will have been writing about Penderwicks for 20 years.

DR. DANA: Wow.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: So I could definitely consider it my life's work. I think that, if anything of me lasts, I hope will be these books.

DR. DANA: Well, Jeanne Birdsall, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles.

JEANNE BIRDSALL: And thank you for having me.

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