

The BiblioFiles: Rebecca Stead

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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 Rebecca Stead, author of *When You Reach Me*, which won the Newbery Medal in 2010.

It's 1979. 12-year-old Miranda is living with her mom in New York City near Amsterdam Avenue. There are rules for navigating New York City, like always have your key out before you reach the front door. If a stranger is hanging out in front of your building, keep walking. If someone is acting strange, cross to the other side of the street. And never show your money on the street.

But what about navigating sixth grade? What do you do when your best friend doesn't want to be friends anymore? A girl in your class calls you an idiot? And you encounter racism for the first time? And then there are the notes-- mysterious notes that appear in unusual places. The cramped, wobbly handwriting hinting of a terrible tragedy to come, but asking you not to tell anyone.

When You Reach Me is best described as a coming-of-age story that suddenly leaps genres, twisting the story so sharply and skillfully that you can almost hear the pieces clicking together as you rocket you through a double-surprise ending that immediately has you re-reading the book and discovering a totally different story underneath.

Rebecca Stead joins us from New York City. Ms. Stead, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

REBECCA STEAD: Thank you. It's great to be here.

DR. DANA: You grew up in New York City, and you live there now. *When You Reach Me* is set in New York City as well. Why did you decide to set your book there?

REBECCA STEAD: Well, the decision to set the book there was actually kind of a long and complicated one. I came up first with the idea for the plot-- the mystery that's threaded throughout the book. And part of my idea for the plot reminded me of someone who was always around my neighborhood when I was growing up. And I worked that person into my story and then realized that I wanted to use a lot of the details from just my memory of childhood.

So the wonderful thing about writing fiction is that no one is stopping you. There's no one saying, you can't do that. So I just thought, I'm going to write this story. Set this story in the time and place of my own childhood. So that's what I did. But it was sort of a two-part decision. So the plot came first and the setting came second.

DR. DANA: The writing style in *When You Reach Me* is very different from the writing style in *First Light*, your first book. *First Light* is written in a more traditional storytelling style, whereas *When You Reach Me* is much more stylistic and conversational with short, quick chapters. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read the first chapter of your book.

REBECCA STEAD: Absolutely. So the first chapter is called 'Things You Keep in a Box.'

"So Mom got the postcard today. It says *Congratulations* in big curly letters, and at the very top is the address of Studio TV-15 on West 58th Street. After three years of trying, she has actually made it. She's going to be a contestant on *The \$20,000 Pyramid*, which is hosted by Dick Clark.

On the postcard there's a list of things to bring. She needs some extra clothes in case she wins and makes it to another show, where they pretend it's the next day even though they really tape five in one afternoon. Barrettes are optional, but she should definitely bring some with her. Unlike me, Mom has glossy red hair that bounces around and might obstruct America's view of her small freckled face.

And then there's the date she's supposed to show up, scrawled in blue pen on a line at the bottom of the card: *April 27, 1979*. Just like you said.

I check the box under my bed, which is where I've kept your notes these past few months. There it is, in your tiny handwriting: *April 27th, Studio TV-15*, the words all jerky-looking, like you wrote them on the subway. Your last "proof."

I still think about the letter you asked me to write. It nags at me, even though you're gone and there's no one to give it to anymore. Sometimes I work on it in my head, trying to map out the story you asked me to tell, about everything that happened this past fall and winter. It's all still there, like a movie I can watch when I want to. Which is never.

DR. DANA: Was it a very different experience writing this book than your first book?

REBECCA STEAD: Yes, it was a very different experience. And responding to what you said about the very different writing styles. I have a thought about that, which is that I think that *First Light*-- which is my first novel-- was much more a response to books I loved when I was a kid.

I loved reading all kinds of books, but I particularly loved books like *Red Planet* by Robert Heinlein, which very few people read anymore, but is a wonderful science fiction story. Heinlein wrote, as I understand it, science fiction that was intended for adults and then some that was for kids. And this is on the kids' side. But it's wonderfully complex and deep, and it has science in it. And I loved that book very much as a kid.

And I think that my first book-- I was trying to write the kind of book I would have loved as a kid. So it's sort of like a book inspired by my childhood reading, and the passion that I felt about reading when I was a kid.

And then *When You Reach Me* feels much more like a book that's directly inspired by childhood itself and sort of setting aside the kinds of things I love to read. It just reflects much more of what I remember about childhood, and how I remember thinking, and the things I thought about. And in a way, I walked around thinking about things that were-- I want to say deeper than things that I often think about now. I mean, as an adult, there's a way in which my focus has narrowed. I'm much more focused on the details, and what has to get done on a day-to-day basis as a mom and with my work. And just doing all the practical things.

And as a kid, I really walked around having these much more existential thoughts about the way things worked. And so I wanted to write something that reflected my feeling about what was going on in my head as a kid. And I think this is very average. I think a lot of kids walk around with really deep thoughts. I think that they're struggling with big questions that adults have kind of learned to set aside. But I like thinking about those questions, so that's one reason I like writing for kids.

DR. DANA: Well, I'd like to ask you about a book you didn't write. *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. Your main character, Miranda, has read *A Wrinkle in Time* hundreds of times and actually carries the book around with her. Miranda ties many of the things happening in her own life to the things that happen to the characters in the book. When did you first read *A Wrinkle in Time*, and what effect did it have on you?

REBECCA STEAD: I read this story, I think I must have been 11, I may have been 12. I loved the book, and I went on to read lots of Madeleine L'Engle books. Not just that series, but also the Austin books. And I was just a huge Madeleine L'Engle fan.

And honestly, I think the biggest part of what I loved about her books were the family portraits. I think that for me, these were like incredibly attractive ideas about what a family is.

I grew up mostly an only child. My dad remarried when I was a teenager. And then I had two stepbrothers. And then my dad had a second child. So I have a brother from the time I was 15. But I really grew up feeling like an only child.

And I loved stories with siblings in it. I loved the stuff in the house, where the twins are kind of rolling all over each other. And I loved the relationship in the book. And the science fiction aspect of it I thought was really interesting, and I loved, and I thought it was very eye-opening, but for me it was the family stuff that was actually the most compelling.

I love that when Meg goes downstairs in the middle of the night, Charles Wallace is there waiting for her, and he's already started her hot chocolate. It's just the idea that somebody knows you that well. It was really, really interesting and kind of alluring to me.

But I read a lot of-- I read other science fiction. So as much as I loved the story aspect of *A Wrinkle in Time*, because I was reading other science fiction, that part was maybe not the biggest thing for me, which is not in any way putting down the story, because of course I loved the story and I love really everything about that book.

Madeleine L'Engle also is the only author I ever met in real life. I met her by going to a bookstore. We didn't have these school visits that everybody has now. I don't know if it was just my little school. We had a lot going on, but we didn't have authors of the books we were reading come and talk to us that I remember. I don't think I had that experience once in school as a kid.

So I remember, though, that she was going to be at a bookstore in the East Side. And I wanted to go and meet her. And she did sign my book. And she signed it the way that Miranda's book is signed. And the way that Madeline L'Engle signs so many book, which is with the words 'Tesser Well.' But just the idea that she wrote my name, you know. And then she signed it. I still have that.

So it's very fun to put that-- that's an element that I put into my own story. When Miranda gets a signed book, and it's inscribed the same way that my book is. That was just fun really. So I did have sort of special feelings, I guess, about Madeline L'Engle and *A Wrinkle in Time*.

But we actually didn't know immediately that we were going to leave that book in this story. For a while I thought it was just like scaffolding almost, like a signal to myself about what kind of character I was creating. You know, who is Miranda? Well, she's the kind of kid who's fiercely devoted to one book to the point where really she's kind of close-minded. I mean she won't even read another book. I mean, people are trying to get her to read other things, and she refuses. And that was saying something to me about who she was. But I wasn't sure that we were going to be able to leave the book *A Wrinkle in Time* in our story. I just wasn't sure that it was appropriate.

DR. DANA: Really? It's so essential to it, though. Doesn't it--

REBECCA STEAD: You know, well, it was a process. What happened was my editor Wendy Lamb and I talked about it and decided that if it was going to stay, I needed to earn a place for it in the story. And so I decided to re-read *A Wrinkle in Time* from the point of view of Marcus, who's a character in *When You Reach Me*, who has a very unusual, singular point of view. And I decided to try to read the book from his point of view. How would Marcus read this story?

So I opened *A Wrinkle in Time* and thought, OK, I'm not reading as me, and I'm not reading as Miranda. I'm reading as Marcus. And I noticed this other things about the book, including this funny little question about time travel. And then I decided that I could use that in order to talk about time travel as a concept, because I wanted my readers to know that they needed to have open minds, and they needed to think very actively and openly about the world in order to embrace my story. And so in the end what I decided to do was to use L'Engle's book to signal to my readers that they were going to have to think big.

DR. DANA: Well, *A Wrinkle in Time* won the Newbery Award in 1963. Your book won the Newbery in 2010. There's something really beautiful about that.

REBECCA STEAD: I'm still amazed by it.

DR. DANA: I'm definitely not going to give anything away, but I will say that this book has a fantastic double twist that not only surprises the reader, but also causes the book to jump into a

completely unexpected genre. Once the secrets are revealed, you realize that you've actually been reading two stories. Was it difficult to craft a book like this?

REBECCA STEAD: You know, it actually wasn't that difficult. I knew where I wanted to end, which was a real gift. That's a really wonderful thing if you know where you're going, I think. And it's not something that happens a lot with me. I'm not an outliner. So having the very full vision of this plot was actually wonderful.

And, you know, I just sort of went along. And I allowed myself to write it in these fragments almost. Some of the chapters are very, very short. And I think that is part of the way my brain works as a writer. I tend to think in fragments. And so I just let myself do that here. And so that was actually really fun, because what I decided is that in a way this book is like a puzzle. So it was all right to write little pieces and to sort of let them fall together.

And I think that it takes a certain kind of reader. There's a little bit of confusion at the beginning, because the story is coming at you in a couple of different directions and you're not necessarily sure how it's all going to come together, but then hopefully there's a feeling of satisfaction as all the pieces grow together, and you begin to see how everything fits.

So it wasn't hard to move forward with it, although there were a couple of points where I lost faith a little bit that I could make it completely satisfying. And so I had one emergency moment, where I had gotten a lot of questions from readers when it was still in the draft form.

One thing that my editor Wendy Lamb and I both tried to do is get readers for every draft, because we figured that once you know the ending of the story, it's hard to re-read the story. There's no going back to that first time that you read it. So it's impossible once you know the end to really know how the pieces add up for someone who's reading it for the first time.

So we got fresh readers for every draft. And we just asked for questions. What didn't work for you? What was confusing? What was obvious? Are there any logical inconsistencies that you can find? Is there anything that doesn't really work, as far as you are concerned?

And so I had one day where I had this giant list of questions from readers. And I just thought, I don't think I can make this logical enough to satisfy myself. So that was sort of a moment of mini-crisis.

And on that morning, I called my dad, actually, who was like a big Star Trek fan and loves speculative fiction and didn't know anything about the story at all. And I said, can you meet me soon. And we went out to breakfast, and I told him the story of the book. And he said, well, I think your problem is, you know, it had to do with actually my theory of time travel. As soon as he said that a whole bunch of things fell into place. I suddenly knew how to answer a lot of the questions I had. And I thought, OK, I can move forward.

But, so that was like a big moment, a big click. But there also were just tiny little things-- following Miranda's apartment key. You know, where is it when? How does it get from here to

there? When does that happen? So people were incredibly helpful about finding these small things, so that I could adjust before we got to the final draft. So I depended on a lot of readers.

DR. DANA: Well, that's really interesting you should say that, because I think a lot of our listeners will be surprised to hear how much work went into writing it. When you read a book, your experiences-- depending on the length of the book and how much time you have, you could read it in a couple days or a couple weeks. And so the book comes on very quickly, and you almost assume in your mind that the author writes at that same pace. But to hear about different drafts and test readers and questions coming back and feedback and the involvement of the editor, you realize that the author is with this book for ages.

REBECCA STEAD: Yeah. Really. It's a long time. You better pick something that interests you, because you spend a lot of time with it. It's a very long process. It was probably nine months of writing and then another six of revision. It's a lot. It's a lot of work.

And one of the most important things about writing-- I mean this sounds really obvious, but if you want to write, you have to have just a willingness to face your first effort. And your first effort is often really discouraging. It's not that great. It's nothing, nothing like what's in your head.

You have this thing living in your head, this idea and it's full of emotion. And it just seems bright and glittery and wonderful and moving and-- you love it. You just love thinking about it. And it's like this secret idea that you're harboring secretly on the subway, and thinking, oh I have this idea in my head and it's so great. But when you start to get it down on the page, it's often just a horribly, sort of clunky, boring, pointless-seeming version of this idea that's in your head. And it's kind of hard to look at it.

Then you think, oh, so this is where I am with this. It can be discouraging. But I don't know a single person, who doesn't face that moment-- a single person who writes. You have to be willing to not be scared of that moment where you think this isn't at all what I want this to be. There maybe a couple of things that you like about it.

And you just have to cling to those things that you like and think, OK, I just have to bump the rest of it up to here. This is what I like. This is what I like. And the rest of it, it pains me to read, but it's OK, because I can just keep gently bumping this up, bumping this up. And one day, I'm going to start to feel generally good about it. And then I'm going to make it even better. And then-- yeah, it's when you've made it the best that you can make it, that is when your readers do come in and just run with it. And so yeah, that's an amazing thing.

DR. DANA: One of the most important and emotional chapters in the book-- it's called "The Last Note"-- is actually written as an itemized list. I know you were a lawyer before you became a writer. Is this a method lawyers use when working on cases?

REBECCA STEAD: That's interesting. You know what? No one's ever pointed that out to me before. But it's true that if you're writing a complaint, you do list, like, factual allegations that

way. It's very interesting. I've never thought about that. But I actually didn't do a lot of that kind of writing as a lawyer, but I have read a bunch of complaints. That's very interesting.

This is one of those things where when I wrote this scene, it just came out that way. And I didn't question it. And I didn't try to defend it. And I didn't think, will people say this is stupid or will people say you have to justify this, why did you do it this way. I just thought, well, for some reason this is the form that this chapter wants to take. And so I'm going to write it this way.

And to me it was a way of showing this difficulty with which Miranda was remembering this truly awful thing that happened. So she's remembering it in a very formal, methodical way that allows her to have some distance from what happened, which is something that upsets her.

But I didn't really articulate that to myself when I was doing it. I just went with it. And no one ever asked me to change it. So I never did.

And sometimes that's how things happen. You go with your instinct and then someone along the way-- your editor or someone else or a friend who's reading for you might say, that confused me or that took me out of the story. Then that's when you have to say, OK, is there a reason why this is like this. But that was one decision that no one ever asked me to defend. So I really never questioned it.

DR. DANA: Rebecca Stead, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles.

REBECCA STEAD: Thank you. It was really fun to be here.

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