

The BiblioFiles: Tracey Baptiste

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

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Tracey Baptiste, author of *The Jumbies*.

Corinne La Mer knows she should stay out of the forest. Her father warned her about wild animals, but some villagers speak of something even more sinister in the forest-- jumbies. Jumbies are bad spirits who can trick you, confuse you, hurt you, or even kill you. While Corinne manages to enter and leave the forest unharmed, she unknowingly leads Severine, a powerful and vengeful jumbie to her home. Severine has a secret to share about Corinne's past and a mission to reclaim what she believes to be hers.

The Jumbies is a fantastically spooky modern folktale. Set in the Caribbean, the book transports the reader to another part of the world while introducing a menagerie of creatures from Caribbean lore-- La Diablesse, soucouyant, lagahoo, douens, and others. It's deliciously spine-tingling, with just the right amount of suspense. But like any good fairy tale, it balances dark with light. *The Jumbies* is also a story of love, courage, resourcefulness, and inner magic.

In addition to *The Jumbies*, Baptiste has written *Angel's Grace*, a young adult novel, and several nonfiction books for middle-grade readers. Tracey Baptiste, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Thank you. Thank you for having me, Dana.

DR. DANA: What is a jumbie?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Well, jumbies are creatures from Caribbean folklore. They are menacing. They are tricky. And they will absolutely eat you if they get half a chance to. And I grew up listening to stories about jumbies when I was a child growing up in Trinidad. At night, everybody talked about jumbies as if they might pop out, out of the shadows, at any moment. So they were very, very much alive in my mind as I grew up.

DR. DANA: Are all jumbies bad?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Typically, yes. They are all bad. I kind of tweaked that a little bit for my story, for the purposes of my story. But traditionally, yes, they're all horrible, horrible creatures.

DR. DANA: In the author's note of your book, you write that you grew up reading European fairy tales that were nothing like the Caribbean jumbie stories told in your community. Can you tell us about where you grew up?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Well, I grew up in Trinidad and Tobago, which is the southernmost island in the Caribbean. And it's a very diverse country. The country has Pitch Lake, which was really interesting to a lot of sailors, back when people were still coming to the New World.

The country also has oil. So there are a lot of people who came in and tried to colonize Trinidad. And as a result, there is a very diverse group of people who live there, including indigenous people, slaves who were brought from Africa, and then indentured laborers who came from India. So it's a really interesting place, I think. I love it, obviously.

In addition, we have a very literary culture. We have a lot of authors who come out of Trinidad. V.S. Naipaul, for example, is world-renowned, and I grew up reading his stories. So it was a pretty interesting place to grow up, for sure.

DR. DANA: So in your opinion, what elements make Caribbean jumbie tales similar to European fairy tales? You mentioned that they were very different for you, but did you find any common ground?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Yes. Actually, the magic element certainly is in both European fairy tales and in the Caribbean fairy tales that I grew up on. And I do tend to call them fairy tales, because for me, it's all kind of the same. And then there's the trickster elements, where in European fairy tales, the fairies will trick you into doing something, or if you do something for them, there's some kind of weird consequence that maybe you hadn't anticipated ahead of time. It's very much the same with Caribbean jumbies.

And the other part is that they're always hidden. You never really-- they're not out in the open. You don't see them, typically, as you're walking down the road. It's usually in some dark forest, usually at night. Usually when you're least suspecting to come upon something is when you come upon all these different kinds of creatures.

DR. DANA: I love how you weave the culture of the Caribbean into your story. You really do transport the reader to another place with your descriptions of the landscapes and the smells and the sounds and the tastes. I'm wondering if you could read a passage that demonstrates this?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Sure.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that Corinne's father has left to fish for the day, and Corinne is taking her oranges to market to sell. Corinne's mother died when she was little, so Corinne is going to market alone.

TRACEY BAPTISTE: "When Corinne's basket was full, she tied her long braids behind her head with a colorful piece of cloth and wrapped another cloth around the basket handles so they wouldn't hurt her hands on the way to market. She walked down the dusty path to the main road and went past the edge of the forest. Pink and red hibiscus held their petals open to the sun while bees took advantage of their pollen. When she paused to switch hands, a hummingbird hovered near her basket for a moment. It seemed to drink in the scent of her oranges before it darted off.

Already, the day was getting hot. The farther Corinne got from the sea, the less breeze there was to cool her. By the time she reached the dry well, the sound of seagulls and waves had become the sound of chirping birds and animals running through the bushes at the sides of the road.

Past the next well, the full one - and - a few houses just outside of town, the sound of the market arose. The hum of people haggling over prices, the chickens squawking, and the cries of goats and pigs filled the air. Then came the smells - ground spices, ripe fruit, and strong coffee among them. Corinne didn't hesitate at the entrance of the market. She walked straight in and staked out a spot in the crowd. She rolled out the cloth from around her hands and spread it on the ground. Then she began to arrange her oranges in pyramids of five on top of it.

"Oh, no, no, no, child," a woman selling eddoes said. "You can't set up here. This is my spot." She was small and brown with short wiry hair just like her vegetables had. Corinne stood up to her full height, which only got her as high as the woman's shoulder.

"There aren't assigned spots," she said sharply.

"Go somewhere else, darling," the eddoes seller said. Her lips smiled, but her eyes were as hard as pebbles. Pebble eyes put her hands on her heavy hips and a tall woman with dry, ashen skin stood up next to her to back her up. Corinne had seen her father deal with rivals before. She stood her ground. But a little way behind them, another woman, selling peppers, smiled at Corinne and beckoned her with a quick flip of her wrist. The pepper vendor folded the edge of her blanket in order to make room. Corinne narrowed her eyes at pebble eyes and her flaky-skinned friend but decided to squeeze in next to the lady with the peppers.

"Thank you," Corinne said as she began to set up. Her new market neighbor was wearing a bright yellow sari and her hair draped behind her like a black silk curtain.

"Don't mind them," the woman said. She raised her voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "Nobody's buying their rotten vegetables anyway." Pebble eyes sneered and grumbled under her breath. Flaky skin sucked her teeth, chups. Corinne smiled at her neighbor, who had soft-looking arms, just the kind that Corinne would have liked to feel folded around her.

A small face peered around the woman and startled Corinne. The face disappeared almost as suddenly as it had shown up. Corinne felt a deep pang of loneliness when she realized that her neighbor had come to the market with her child. She tried to shake off the feeling.

"I have the sweetest oranges on the island," she said.

"Very good," the woman in the sari said. "You'll get a lot of customers, then." The market bustled with people haggling about money and the quality of produce. Coins dropped into hands and jingled in pouches. Vendors sang about their wares over the steady hum of negotiations.

"Sweet, sweet figs here! Get your sweet figs!"

"Potatoes for stew! Cheap for me! Plenty for you!"

"Nice ripe melongene! Ask Miss Jen for melongene!"

"Long mango! Sweet mango! Julie mango! Sweet mango!"

And then the market voices fell silent. The hush began at one side of the square and rippled out to every corner. A beautiful woman moved past market-goers in the suddenly still crowd. She was dressed in a green cloth the color of forest leaves. Corinne pushed through elbows to get a better look.

The cloth wrapped around her body flowed behind her. She walked with such grace that she appeared to be gliding along on a ribbon of green. Her skin was the deep brown color of wet soil. Her hair was piled high on top of her head in a yellow, blue, and green cloth. She paused briefly and turned. Corinne felt as though the woman looked right inside of her, and her heart leaped in her chest. But it was impossible to tell who the woman was really looking at from her deep-set eyes outlined by thick eyelashes as black as shade.

Corinne kept fixed on the woman as she walked through the market. As she passed, the crowd found its voice again. Some held out their produce for her to buy. Those who didn't narrowed their eyes and whispered about her behind their hands.

"Who is she?"

"All my born days and I never saw that woman before."

"Anyone know who her people are? There's no way to tell what kind of person she is without knowing her family." The woman in green finally stopped far from Corinne, in front of an ancient woman with striking white hair, who sat beneath the only tree in the market. She had come to see the witch."

DR. DANA: Thank you! And thank you for clearing up the sound that people make. Chups! I didn't know how that sounded. [LAUGHTER] But they do it a couple times.

TRACEY BAPTISTE: It's kind of a weird sound, but it's something that people from the Caribbean-- and I actually think it's also African. People make that sound to express displeasure.

DR. DANA: So it's a quick sucking in of the teeth?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: It's a quick sucking of your teeth, yeah. So sometimes it's described as sucking your teeth, and sometimes it's described as chups, basically. Because that kind of the sound that it makes.

DR. DANA: So it's like a tsk? Like—tsk.

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Yeah - it's like, tsk. And it's extremely rude. Children are not supposed to do that, say, to an adult or to their parents. Certainly I have gotten a couple of quick spankings for doing that when I was a child. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: This passage also introduces in fine style the villainess of the story, Severine. How did you create this character? She's so bad. [LAUGHTER]

TRACEY BAPTISTE: It was not easy, actually, to create Severine. I could not figure out what her motives were. But once I decided that she was family, she became really fully formed in my mind. And it was easier to make her not just bad, but also a little sympathetic. Because you kind of-- you feel a little bit bad for her once you really understand what her perspective is, which is something that I really wanted to bring to the story, because I wanted to have the reader have that little bit of conflict over what exactly should happen here. And how should it happen? You know, everything is not black and white. And how do you really respond to that?

DR. DANA: There's plenty of magic in this story, but it's not the shouting-Latin-spells, waving-wands sort of magic. There's magic with potions and herbs. There's supernatural magic, when jumbies like Severine shape-shift. There's the natural magic of growing things and animals. How did you decide which magic to use?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: This is the kind of magic I grew up with in the Caribbean. It's more natural. It's more grounded. You know, going to some person, not necessarily a medicine person, but just some person who knew things-- there was never really any name for any of these people-- who could give you some kind of herb or something that would help whatever it was that ailed you, was pretty commonplace. I was a very sickly child. As a kid, I caught pretty much everything there was to catch. And so my mother would take me to the doctor and would also very dutifully take me around to all of these various people to get X or Y herb, or kind of supplement, or whatever it was. It was always--

DR. DANA: What was the strangest thing you had to take?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: You know, I don't know. But it was always-- it was always stuff that somebody, like, went out in the back and picked it. And it was stuff that people used, or had been using, for a really long time. So it was all, like, these fresh herbs and things. I never liked it, because I was a very picky eater to begin with. So to eat or drink any of these things was just the worst for me.

So that was the kind of magic I was used to. Because for me, it was not medicine, even though, I mean, obviously medicines are made from a lot of these ingredients. But for me, it was magic. It was not really medicine. And so that's the kind of magic that I wanted to use in the story, because that's what I grew up with.

DR. DANA: One of your characters, Malik, doesn't speak. Instead he communicates by gestures. How did this character develop for you? It's really interesting to have a character with no voice.

TRACEY BAPTISTE: [LAUGHING] With no voice, yeah. I actually thought it would be funny if he just didn't say anything. Of course, he does speak at the very end, and so then his words really have impact. Because he only says the one thing at the very end of the story.

But it actually came about because my husband's uncle is a man of few words. And when he speaks, it has real gravity. People really listen to what he says when he says something, because it is not often that he will speak up about anything at all. And so the idea really came from there.

And then the idea of using the gestures to have him communicate in the meantime actually came from my agent. Because she felt that it was not working the way I had it, where really only Bouki could understand him and would translate for him. And she felt that he kind of had to have his own language of gestures. And so then I developed that afterwards. But yeah, it started out just because I thought it would be really funny and kooky to have a main character who literally says nothing at all.

DR. DANA: Did anything strange or supernatural happen to you while you were writing *The Jumbies*?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: No, I wish! Actually, no, that's not true! There was something very strange that happened. And I mean, I wrote this over the course of many years, because it was just really hard to pin down. Especially pinning down Severine was really the hardest part for me.

But there was one night. It was New Year's Eve, and it was freezing cold. And all of a sudden-- it's was like maybe 1 o'clock in the morning, 2 o'clock in the morning. I'm not really sure. The kids were in bed. My husband and I were asleep. And the doorbell rang.

And we went-- my husband-- like, we get up. And so of course, we're thinking there's something horrible happening. We run to the door, and there are two children standing at our front porch in their pajamas, barefoot. And you can see the little tracks of their feet in the snow, because it had been snowing, coming up to the house.

And we opened up the door. And we'd never seen these kids before. They're not from the neighborhood. My husband grabs up the little girl, who's about five-- which I think was our daughter's age at the time. And he's holding her, and the boy is saying that they're there alone.

So I run and I go grab the phone. And it turned out to be nothing. It turned out that they had come from a New Year's Eve party at a house across the street. And the father was putting all the sleeping children into the car, one by one. And so the boy had just woken up and got scared. They were parked outside of our house, so they just came up to our house. But it was a very Hansel and Gretel kind of situation.

DR. DANA: Did you check to make sure their feet weren't on backwards? [LAUGHTER]

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Weren't backwards? Yes. [LAUGHTER] Yeah I mean, it definitely wasn't. But, like, in that moment, it was just so spooky that these children would show up, like, walking through the snow in their pajamas, barefoot. It was just the weirdest, most bizarre, crazy thing. And you know, it felt very much like we were in the middle of a fairy tale at that moment-- until, of course, you know, the father showed up with a third child that he was going to put in the car. And was just like, "Oh my god, they woke up! So sorry." And then it-- you know, it was immediately back to reality.

But that moment, for me, it's kind of funny. You know, I almost never think about it, but it kind of gelled the feeling of keeping this particular story as spooky as it needed to be. Because that really-- you know, as a parent, it puts chills up your spine. You know, we went back upstairs and we checked all the kids, make sure they were in their beds. I mean, everything was fine, but it really amps up how kind of thrilling some small thing like that can be.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Oh, good lord. Um-- [LAUGHTER]. I am working on many things. It's a little bit nutty right now, actually. So I'm working on two middle-grade novels at the same time. I'm working on a science-fiction novel about a boy who lives in this future society where his people are kind of scattered to the wind, a little bit. And they're being hunted down. And I'm working on the sequel to *The Jumbies*.

DR. DANA: Ooh!

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Yeah! Which I actually sent out the outline to my agent this morning, like maybe half an hour before we got on the phone. I'm also working on two nonfiction books. One is a biography, and one is about social media, which I find just really fascinating, what social media is doing as far as people's relationships. Is it good? Is it bad? You know, I mean, this is a really big debate right now. What is social media doing for our society?

So those are-- those are the things I'm working on, or the things I'm writing. I'm also editing a lot of books. But that's pretty typical, because I do work for a couple of different publishers editing books for them. So it's-- it's busy, for sure. Which is nice.

DR. DANA: Tracey Baptiste, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

TRACEY BAPTISTE: Thank you so much for having me.

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