

The BiblioFiles: Wendy Mass

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DR. DANA: WPRB, The All-Ages Show, and the Cotsen Children's Library present The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today I'll be talking with Wendy Mass, author of many books for young adults. But today we'll be focusing on two of her books-- A Mango-Shaped Space and Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life.

A Mango-Shaped Space is about a girl named Mia, who has a rare but extremely interesting condition that she is finding increasingly difficult to hide from her family, friends, and schoolmates. Written from Mia's prospective, the book gives an intimate and completely fascinating firsthand look into what it's like to have this condition.

Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life is about a soon-to-be teenager who is thrown into a modern-day quest when he receives a mysterious package from his father, who died four years earlier. The package contains a locked wooden box with four key holes, but no keys. Carved on the top of the box are the words "the meaning of life for Jeremy Fink to open on his 13th birthday." Jeremy and his best friend, Lizzy, have four weeks to scour New York City to find the keys in time for Jeremy's birthday. It's a fantastic and intriguing read, full of humor, wit, insight, and emotion as Jeremy comes to grips with the death of his father and, yes, the meaning of life.

A Mango-Shaped Space won the American Library Association's Schneider Family Book Award in 2004. Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life was named as a Junior Library Guild Premiere Selection, and was included in the New York Public Library's Best Books for the Teen Age in 2007.

Miss Mass joins us from her home in New Jersey. Miss Mass, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

WENDY MASS: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

DR. DANA: A Mango-Shaped Space was your first book. It was published in 2003. What were you doing right before you decided, OK, I'm going to write a book?

WENDY MASS: Well, A Mango-Shaped Space was my first book published, but it wasn't the first one that I wrote. Those, in fact, are buried in the bottom of my desk drawer never to see the light of day. But I've known since college that this is the age I wanted to write for. And the years leading up to when Mango came out was really just me in search of the right idea, and knowing in the back of my mind that this is what I was going to do, and this is what I really wanted to do more than anything.

When people ask me, how do you become a writer? The first thing I ask them is, is there anything else that you'd really want to do? Because it's so hard to break in. And once it's your job, it's hard. And I just knew that this was the thing that I wanted to do more than anything. I just kept looking for a story idea. And when I found it, I was walking through the stacks in my local library, and a book literally fell off the shelf in front of me. And I went to put it back in its exact, rightful spot, because I had been a huge library person my whole life. And you couldn't just leave a book in the wrong place. You just couldn't do that. So when I was putting it away, I looked at it. And it was called *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*. And I thought, that was a really strange title. And I knew I wasn't in the fiction section, so I knew this was a real book. And I was just intrigued. And I opened it, and I read the flap copy. And I learned about this condition called synesthesia that you mentioned. And it just dawned on me that I had never seen this in fiction before. And it just seemed like such an interesting phenomenon to explore.

The book is about this girl named Mia who's 13. And she has this condition called synesthesia, which literally means-- your senses coming together. So if you were going into surgery, and they were giving you anesthesia to dull your senses, this is similar. Synesthesia-- senses coming together. And so your five senses-- seeing, hearing, taste, touch, and smell-- can get crossed in different ways in the brains of people who have this. And one of the most common ways that it crosses is that your auditory and visual senses could be linked. So if I were to drop a book on the floor, you and I would hear it crash to the floor. But somebody with synesthesia would hear it crash to the floor but would also see a pattern of colors in front of their face for as long as the sound lasts.

Some of the other really interesting ways that it crosses is-- well, in the book that I had learned about this from, *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, his sense of touch and taste were crossed. So he would taste something and literally feel it on different parts of his body.

And the more I learned about this, the more I realized it's such an internal condition. Nobody looking at you would know that you were experiencing these things. So I loved the idea of giving it to a 13-year-old who-- going through that time in life where you want to be different from your peers, but not too different. And she was really feeling very different, because she would mention something about this to somebody at different points in her life and get just shot down-- just be told, you're a freak. What are you talking about? Letters don't have colors. Numbers don't have colors. Which is one of the really basic facts about synesthesia-- to most people who have it, whatever form they have, their alphabet and numbers are in color. For instance, the letter D would be light blue. Whether the person was 18 or 80, they would always have the same perception when they saw the letter D or heard the letter D or even thought about it. And I just loved exploring this idea and seeing how it played out in her life.

DR. DANA: I'd like to ask you to read a passage from *A Mango-Shaped Space*, a passage that I really like that exemplifies what Mia goes through. And in this, her brother has snuck into her room because he's worried that her clock collection isn't set to the right time, and the future and the past will be present in one room, and it'll be messing up the time-space continuum. Her brother, Zack, is a very, very quirky sixth-grader. But it backfires, because all the clocks go off at once. And even though she keeps the volume down, Zack has turned them all the way up without her knowing.

WENDY MASS: "I don't get to finish my sentence because at that moment all the clocks strike five. The cuckoo pops out and cuckoos. Loudly. The train blows its whistle. Really loudly. All the alarms go off at the same time-- buzzing and chiming and ringing and shrieking-- all much louder than I've ever heard them. My father is still hammering. My mother honks in the driveway to let us know she is back from the airport with Beth. Beth slams the front door open and drops her suitcase on the floor. Mango runs under the bed. I put my hands over my ears and shut my eyes to stop all the colors that are bombarding me.

It doesn't work. My sight is filled with blurry purple triangles and waves of green and floating black dots and balls of all sizes and shapes of colors, spinning, swooping, swirling in front of me and across the room and in my mind's eye. If I had been prepared, I would have been able to anticipate the onslaught, but now it is overwhelming and I feel like I'm suffocating.

'What's wrong with you?' Zack shouts. I'm crouching on the floor now.

'Why is everything so loud?' I cry above the noise.

A second later the chimes stop. No more honking, no more doors slamming, just the usual hammering. The colors and shapes quickly fade away, and I feel like I can breathe again. I open my eyes to find Zack staring at me with a combination of concern and surprise."

DR. DANA: I've never read a book that tackles such an unusual subject so beautifully. In fact, even though Mia is clearly going through some problems with her condition, I actually find myself being a little bit envious that I didn't have this condition-- synesthesia. What sort of reaction did *A Mango-Shaped Space* get from readers and synesthetes?

WENDY MASS: Well, it's interesting. The very first email I got from a young reader was from a boy, which surprised me initially since the book has a girl as a main character. And it was a boy who had synesthesia. And he was 14. And he said he found the book on the new releases bookshelf of his library. And I didn't even know the book was out yet. So it had really just come out. This library was right on top of things. And he said he picked it up and brought it home just without really even thinking, and then read it once he got home and realized that, this is what he had, and that he didn't know there was a name for it. And he had the same experience as Mia, where he started talking about it when he was younger, and people gave him very strange looks. And he never brought it up again. And so he was shocked to find a book about it that explored what he went through. So that was really nice for me. And then it took me about a year after that to hear from another person with synesthesia. And now it's maybe about once a month I hear from somebody. But it's also been fun to hear from people who don't have it and-- like you and like myself as well when I was researching the book-- wished that they did have it. And got so interested in it that they started researching it for school projects, for science fairs, and things like that. And I thought that was nice-- to find a subject that interested me and then, in turn, interested other people.

DR. DANA: I'd like to talk about Jeremy Fink and *The Meaning of Life*, next. I feel that this book should be mandatory reading for everyone. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

WENDY MASS: Yes, Jeremy Fink really was born from my interest in the search for the meaning of life. Not necessarily in finding a meaning, but in the search for it. And I basically went through my bookshelves and my husband's bookshelves and pulled out books on the meaning of life, and was shocked to see how many I had from all different angles-- from a scientific angle and religious and philosophical and man-on-the-street angle. And I liked the idea of giving this quest to a teenage boy and seeing what he came up with. So I had a lot of fun writing it because I got to learn a lot. Because I probably read maybe 1% of the books on my shelf. And this forced me to actually do that.

The book is about, as you said-- this boy named Jeremy gets a box in the mail, and it purports to contain the meaning of life. And he and his best friend, Lizzy, go on this quest, mostly through the streets of Manhattan, but out into New Jersey as well, to find the keys to the box, but also to see how much they can learn about the meaning of life in case they never find the keys and can't open the box. And I just had so much fun writing this book.

DR. DANA: And Jeremy is a very unusual main character. Jeremy is terrified of everything. And Jeremy is still really deeply pained by his father's death. It keeps him from leaving his home. It keeps him from public transportation in many ways. He's scared of things. And the thing about the book is that a chapter will go by, everything's fine. And then one thing will remind Jeremy of his father, and he gets stuck. Why did you choose to present Jeremy in this way? Why did you make him scared?

WENDY MASS: I think if he was at ease with even himself and the world, then this quest wouldn't be as important. And it wouldn't be as difficult. And then it wouldn't mean as much. I think by having him feel safer within the confines of his apartment building and the maybe four blocks around it, that it forced him out of that. I think it forced him to grow in many ways other than just to try to find the meaning of life. He really had to step out of his comfort zone.

And I liked the character of Lizzy, because she was the opposite. She was fearless. And she really had to be the one forcing him to break out and really conquer his fears. And I think that's where some of the humor comes in the book, too. Because some of it isn't funny. Like you said, he's still mourning his dad. And he's feeling very frustrated about not being able to get into this box. And I think I needed to add some humor to it whenever I could to balance out the deeper themes.

DR. DANA: I also liked the "hour of Jeremy." What is the "hour of Jeremy"?

WENDY MASS: The "hour of Jeremy" is just an hour each night which he takes to do his own thing. He doesn't do homework, and he doesn't clean his room. He just takes this time to read whatever he wants to read and learn about whatever he wants to learn about. And it's just this sort of sacred time to him. So I like hearing from kids when they say that they start their own hour of-- insert their name. And I think that that's nice. Because I think that sometimes it's hard for kids to recognize that they can have alone time and quiet time, and that their schedule doesn't always have to be filled with outside things or homework. I really do hope-- and I think that it's coming true-- that kids are spending more time learning what they want to learn these days. And

there's so much information out there that's so much easier to find than when we were growing up. And I think that that's allowing them to spread their wings that way.

My middle school had the big sign carved over the doorway called "knowledge is power." So that's always stuck in my head. So I hope people feel that way, too. And not power in an evil, take-over-the-world way. Power in terms of empowering yourself, I think.

DR. DANA: So was that at your Middle School for Evil Villains?

WENDY MASS: Yes, for young masterminds. Exactly.

DR. DANA: So I must admit that when I finally reached the end of *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life*, and when I finally found out what was in the box, I cried. Without giving anything away, of course, did you know what was going to be in the box when you started writing the story?

WENDY MASS: You know, I didn't know what was going to be in the box, not only when I started writing, but when I was in the middle, and when I was at the end. I didn't know. I think when you set up this premise on page one that the meaning of life is in this box, you have this responsibility to the reader to come through with that, and to give them something that they're going to feel really satisfied about after taking a journey through the book. So it was just a lot of pressure that I was feeling. And my editor would keep calling me and saying, so what's going to be in the box? I would say, hey, I'm sorry. I just don't know. Just hang on.

And I wound up going back to my mom's house, who still lives in the house I grew up in in Livingston, New Jersey. And I went through boxes of old stuff from my old bedroom, and I found the main object that I wanted to put in the box. And it just hit me that that's what it had to be. I went back through the book and laid some threads that needed to be there-- to put what was finally in the box, in the box.

And I'd actually flirted with the idea of leaving the box empty. And then having the answer be, whatever you think should be in a box should be in the box. And then I thought I'd get all this hate mail from readers and agreed that that probably wasn't the smartest idea. I'm glad to hear you liked what's in the box, because it was a little nerve-wracking.

DR. DANA: So *A Mango-Shaped Space* and *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* both have characters who are dealing with the death of a loved one. Two of these characters, Jeremy Fink and Mia's friend, Jenna, have parents who have left behind a way of communicating with them after their deaths. So what interested you about this particular theme?

WENDY MASS: Honestly, I hadn't realized that I had used this theme twice until after I had finished writing *Jeremy Fink*. Probably the best thing I could say is that I hadn't felt done with it at the end of *A Mango-Shaped Space*. I still felt like I had more to say. And I notice that I do that in my books-- I tend to put things in one book, and then explore that even further in a later book without even realizing it.

And I'll give you an example of that with astronomy. So in *A Mango-Shaped Space*, Mia's mother is an astronomy teacher. And in *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life*, he's interested in astronomy, and he wants a telescope for his birthday. And then in *Every Soul A Star*, which is my most recent book, it's all about astronomy. And I really hadn't realized that I was doing that until just recently when someone pointed it out to me. So I think that's what happens-- that writers keep sneaking the things in there that interest them without even thinking ahead.

DR. DANA: So actually, this leads into my next question. Because we have been just talking about two of your books, but you've published many more. And the two most recent are *Every Soul A Star*, which was published in 2008, and *11 Birthdays*, which was published in January of this year.

Every Soul A Star intertwines the perspectives of three characters. And each new chapter flips to the perspective of a different character. And so, it presents not only the inner thoughts of the characters but also how the other characters in the story see each other. It must have felt like you were writing three different books. Was it hard to write an entire book this way?

WENDY MASS: It really wasn't that hard. I really felt close to each of the three characters, and I tried to make them really different. The hard part is that they were each told in the first person. So I felt like I had to make them really different from the very beginning, so that as soon as you were a few lines into that person's chapter, you always knew who it was. And I would get so attached to them that by the time I was done with one person's chapter, I was eager to get back to the next one. And it would keep going like that. And I wound up making this big chart where I wrote the names of the three characters at the top and then the chapter numbers down the side. And I just wrote a little paragraph about what each person was doing in each chapter and how their story was moving the plot along, so that I could keep track with what was happening where. And that was really helpful.

DR. DANA: I like the idea of authors creating these extra documents and these charts and these graphs and these blueprints, because it just shows that it's a world that they're creating. It's not just a blank page, and words going onto it as they sip their coffee and leisurely look out the window every once in a while, and look wistful, you know.

WENDY MASS: Right. On their tropical island. Yeah, I do have a lot of material beforehand sometimes. And each book's different. In *Every Soul A Star* I outlined on an artist's sketch book. I don't know why it needed to be that way. And *A Mango-Shaped Space* I actually wrote on a roll of, butcher paper, I guess they call it. I picked it up at a flea market or something, just this roll of brown paper. And that's how I wrote that book.

DR. DANA: *Every Soul A Star* centers around a solar eclipse, a total solar eclipse. And that's something that only happens once every several years. But there are people, eclipse chasers, who go to various parts of the world to view these. Did you go and see a total solar eclipse? What inspired this book?

WENDY MASS: This book I had just finished writing, I think, *Heaven Looks A Lot Like The Mall*, and I was ready to absorb whatever the universe was telling me my next book was going to

be. And I was in a bookstore and just glancing at the cover of the magazine in the magazine rack, and saw an issue of Sky & Telescope with this big image of an eclipse on it. And when you're looking at a total solar eclipse, all you can see is this faint haze, this glowing halo where the sun used to be, sort of around the sun. So it's just this very eye-catching photograph. And I picked up the magazine and read that it was about an eclipse that had taken place in Turkey the month before. And I just read the first few pages and started reading about different people's experiences of it-- the kid who got dragged along by his parents, and the person who lives there where the eclipse was. And it just occurred to me that it would be a really fun thing to experience an eclipse, but from different people's points of view. And then it hooked me right away.

DR. DANA: So flea markets, libraries, and bookstores-- where else do you lurk? Garage sales?

WENDY MASS: That's pretty much it. I do love doing research. When a topic interests me, it's just an opportunity to learn more about it. So I started going to telescope conventions and planetariums and all of these things. I would tell myself I was doing research, but having fun at the same time and learning things.

DR. DANA: Well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me. It's been a real pleasure and an honor to talk to you.

WENDY MASS: You, too. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

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