

# The BiblioFiles: Christine Day

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

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DR. DANA: Hi, I'm Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Christine Day, author of middle grade novels *I Can Make this Promise*, and her most recent release, *The Sea in Winter*. She was also a featured writer for Chelsea Clinton's *She Persisted* series, specifically writing about Maria Tallchief, America's first prima ballerina and citizen of the Osage Nation.

In *I Can Make this Promise*, we meet 12-year-old Edie, whose creative project with two friends leads to the discovery of a box in the attic of her house. Inside the box are photographs, postcards, a notebook, and letters that make her realize that her family has been hiding something major from her. The more she investigates, the more she learns about her mother's past, and the complicated history of her family tree. *I Can Make This Promise* was listed as a best book of the year by NPR, and was a Charlotte Huck Award Honor Book, as well as an American Indian Youth Literature Award Honor Book.

*The Sea in Winter* is a story about Maisie, who is devastated after she injures herself in ballet class. Ballet is her life, and she grapples with not only the pain of her injury, but the loss of the joy dancing brings her, as well as her connection to her friends. When Maisie's family takes a road trip, she finds herself confronting what her identity, both ballet and beyond, really means to her.

Day's work has many layers. One layer is the story of her main characters as they struggle and overcome difficult and emotional experiences. Another layer is how these characters connect to their families for support and guidance. Yet another layer is how her characters connect to their identities as Native people. Day blends these layers together flawlessly and compassionately, allowing the reader to deeply engage and empathize. There are difficult truths in these books, but in Day's talented hands, the reader gets through them, and, like the characters, emerges in a better, stronger place.

In addition to her novels, Day has contributed her work to two collections, *Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids*, and *Our Stories, Our Voices: 21 YA Authors Get Real About Injustice, Empowerment, and Growing Up Female in America*.

Christine Day, welcome to The BiblioFiles!

CHRISTINE DAY: Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here today chatting with you.

DR. DANA: In your most recent novel, *The Sea in Winter*, the main character, 12-year-old Maisie uses writing to express and explore herself. Ultimately, she decides to enroll in a creative writing class at school. Can you tell us a little bit about your own relationship with writing when you were Maisie's age.

CHRISTINE DAY: Oh yeah. Great question. Thanks. Like Maisie, I was a dancer as well as a sort of young budding writer. Those were two things that even from a young age I always knew I wanted to do or I wanted to have as a big part of my life.

And like Maisie, I actually endured some injuries, which ultimately led to me pulling out of my dance lessons. But I continued on with the writing obviously. And so far, it's worked out pretty well for me thankfully. And it's just one of those things that I was such an avid reader. I was just always reading a ton of books.

I think that my middle grade years is really when I became a more independent reader. I really started kind of developing my own taste in stories and in being able to seek out my own books. I was just constantly kind of emulating what I saw in the books, and movies, and other media I was sort of consuming.

I suppose I've just always continued on doing that, trying to sort of emulate what people are able to do with words. Because I do think it's really incredible how these characters who just exist as written words on a page can feel so real and immediate in how their sort of emotional journeys can be something that the reader goes on with them. And maybe in their own way through seeing how their stories develop, it can help them sort of figure out how those things connect to their own life or for kids giving them an escape.

All those things, I think, are just really incredible experiences. It's just something I've always been drawn to. And I'm sure I've gotten a lot better at it than when I was 12. I was rudimentary back then.

DR. DANA: I wanted to ask you about a specific scene in the novel. When Maisie re-injures the torn ACL in her knee, would you be willing to read this passage for us now?

CHRISTINE DAY: I would be happy to.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that Maisie and her family are on vacation. And they've all been looking forward to it, but this trip involves hiking. And, unfortunately, at this moment in the story, Maisie foot catches a root, and she trips. And she re-injures her knee.

CHRISTINE DAY: Yes, she does. And I think it's also worth noting that at this point she is still doing physical therapy. And she is still going through this recovery process. But she has been a little bit dishonest with the adults in her life about just how well her recovery is going. She kind of fakes it through a lot of the pain because she wants to heal faster.

And if she had been more honest, I think it is kind of open to interpretation about whether or not they would have gone on this hike at all. But this is sort of this moment where we see her re-injure herself. And, yeah, this happens at the trail at Cape Flattery in western Washington state, which is the northwestern most point of the contiguous United States. And it's also on the Makah reservation, which is where her mother is from.

So this is from Chapter 29, End of the Road, Part II, February 19.

“I cry out as the pain crumbles me. I sense my family in a flurry behind me. Mom's and Jack's voice is pitched in panic as I lift my foot and try to hop to the nearest tree trunk to support myself. But the roots jutting out of the ground form a perilous web, and I trip again catching myself on my hands. Jolting my elbows. The fingers of my fuzzy pink mittens dig into the damp soil, the cold seeping through to my skin.

And the *pain*. How can it be so intense? How is this even possible? One second, barely nudged at the wrong angle, and it's like all my months of physical therapy and recovery and carefulness

have been erased. The pain is searing. It empties the air from my lungs. Tears well in my eyes. I gasp and croak. The muscles in my knee throb and tighten to excruciating uselessness.

"*Maisie?*" Jack appears at my side. His arm tightens around my waist, holding me up. His eyes scanned my face, my body. "Maisie, what *happened?*"

But I can't speak. I can't form sentences.

My mind is racing, speeding through the hours and days and months ahead, and my heart is pounding, and I can't even bring myself to stop or wipe away the burning tears on my cheeks. A ragged sob rips through me. My right foot is still lifted, dangling helplessly. I swallow a breath and try to hold it behind my sternum as I gingerly tilt and try to put weight on my leg, but I can't. The pain ripples all the way through me. My leg nearly collapses. Bright spots form along the edges of my vision.

Mom is in front of me now and she's saying, "It's okay, sweetheart." She's saying, "It's okay, keep your weight off of it. Don't press down. Just lift your foot—yes, that's right. That's my girl."

A pathetic mewling sound rises in my throat. Terror grips me by the jaw. My teeth are clenched so tight, I briefly fear that they might crack and break. But even that wouldn't be any worse than this.

I've already had the surgery, the surgery that was supposed to fix everything. I've had the surgery, and I've been in physical therapy for months. I've been hitting every milestone, and for what?

How will I ever return from this?

I won't. I won't.

"I need you to put your arm around my shoulders," Jack says. "We're going back to the car now, okay? And I'm going to help you. But I need you to lean on me a little bit. I need you to trust me."

I'm hiccuping sobs. And I'm reaching across his shoulders accidentally smearing bits of dirt on his black leather jacket. My fuzzy pink mittens are smudged in filth probably ruined like my knee, like me.”

DR. DANA: Thank you.

CHRISTINE DAY: You're so welcome.

DR. DANA: The re-injury is very painful for Maisie. It's obviously physically painful. But it's emotionally painful, as well. The reason I'm so interested in the scene is that it's also cathartic. There have been hints and foreshadowing building up to the re-injury that has been kind of keeping us unstable as readers. And now the injury—it finally happens. And the emotional floodgate is opened. And it's clearly something she needs to get through in order to get better. But as a writer, how hard is it to make Maisie go through this?

CHRISTINE DAY: Right. I think that's such a great question. And I do think that it's one of those things where as I kind of hinted at before I read that she has not actually been honest with herself about her recovery process. And since this is all written from her perspective, even we see these lines about how she's been hitting every milestone. That's not necessarily true. And even though it's something that she's been telling herself, we see Jack literally swooping in and telling her she needs to lean on him. And that that's sort of a pretty major theme in the book is this idea that in order to do the true work of healing, you have to feel it. And you also have to turn to your family and community and allow them to help you through it and allow yourself to be vulnerable enough to get that help that you need.

And I think that that's a lesson I really could have used when I was a middle schooler. I went through things that I had a hard time talking about or turning to adults for their guidance, even adults who had gone through similar things in my life or people who I trusted or were very close with.

I think that this is a really common thing for middle school aged students. And so even if it manifests in different ways for different people, it's just something I felt a lot of readers would need to see. And it is interesting because when you really get down to it, *The Sea in Winter*, as you said, as you're reading it, you feel unstable. You're right there with her sort of wondering what's going to happen. But I like what you said about it being a cathartic moment though.

Because, really, in a way, I think that the reader kind of knows from the beginning that this will not end well. And that she's probably—I didn't really follow a traditional trajectory that you see in a lot of middle grade books where there's a very clear rising action. There's not a lot of rising action in this book. And there's not a lot of sort of higher stakes than the simple question of “Will this girl be OK?”

And at the end of the day, it's not so much about this specific injury. It's just about that broader question of “Will she be OK?” And that is just such, again, a pervasive question in the minds of kids who are going through something. And I was also very purposeful about this book mostly taking course over just a few days because I believe that when you're a young person going through these things, every single day just feels years long. And it's something that adult readers, who have gone through big moments like this in their life, they know that this is just a season of their life or a time that will pass. But a lot of grownups kind of forget that kids don't have that same sort of hindsight yet, that everything still feels very immediate to them.

A single day could kind of make or break you when you're in middle school. And so for me even though it is a difficult thing to write and to sort of reenter that headspace as a writer and to really try to think through how a 12-year-old girl would feel this moment in her body and in how heartbreaking it would be for her because all she wants is to get back to some semblance of her normal, her sanctuary—that's the word that she uses to describe her ballet studio. It is her safe place. It is the place where she has her closest friends.

And she's just going through this really turbulent time. And it is difficult to write for sure. This was not an easy book to write on like many levels for me. But I really felt that it was something potentially important for kids.

And I also just wanted to rise to the personal challenge of writing a book that was quieter like this. It is a very quiet story. And so much of it—I knew it wasn't going to be for everybody because so much of it is just about sort of the language in the book.

And it is so deeply character driven that if this is not a situation or a set of characters that you really connect with, the entire book just won't work for that particular reader. But I do believe that there are plenty of young people out there who need that kind of guidance or that kind of

little voice to show them that it will be OK eventually. And so that's who I was really writing it for.

DR. DANA: I'm also curious about the title of the novel, *The Sea in Winter*. I feel that in many ways, the sea is a character in this story. Could you tell us a little bit more about the title and the significance of the sea not only to Maisie and her family, but also to you?

CHRISTINE DAY: Oh yeah. I have a hard time with titles, I won't lie. This book had a few different working titles that we went through. And I'm so grateful to my editor who really helped guide me away from titles that were just not quite fitting right. She's given me this advice a few times now, which is to really as I'm going through revisions and editing the book pay attention to specific lines, and phrases, and words in the text that for some reason jump out at me and that maybe that will work as a title. I kept that in mind as I was going through one of the final revisions of this book. And I came across the sea in winter.

It was in a passage earlier on in the story from when Maisie and her family are taking that ferry boat ride across the Puget Sound from Seattle to the Olympic Peninsula, which is where the majority of this mid-winter trip takes place. And I brought it up to (my editor) Rosemary. And she was like, yeah, that has to be it because it did feel like such a—as you said, the sea really is a character in this book and in a lot of my work, I think.

And the sea in winter specifically—it's a time when there's just so much to it because it's a time when most people generally avoid beaches. It's not really time when people go seek out the coastline. But here in the Pacific Northwest, some people do, especially Native folks. We see her and her family go digging for shellfish. And they do all these things that are sort of traditional. And they're going to these sites that are really historic and meaningful for them.

There's also just how turbulent and dark the sea can be during the winter time, how much colder it is. And I felt like as she is sort of going through this time where she's really grappling with these sort of big questions about whether or not she will be OK, she loses patience with her family. She sort of is just going through her own turbulent time.

And so I thought that it was really reflective of how she was feeling, but also just thinking about the significance of these real places of what the sea means to me as an individual and just how so much of Native activism and histories are very place based. And, here, in the Pacific Northwest,

these waterways—I've heard other Native folks refer to them as our ancestral highways, that this is really how a lot of like Native communities would travel by canoe. And that was how they worked together, and traded, and exchanged, and sort of move through the land and travel to different places was all based by the water.

The water really is this connecting body. And still to this day, we see how waterways sort of work and how they connect great bigger pieces of land, how the oceans are—you can think of them as like these bodies of water that push continents apart, but also how they connect them and actually keep these faraway places together and connected. I think that there's just so much sort of really interesting real-world connections like that as well as sort of literary, poetic metaphors that you can apply to the sea and to waterways.

And another big part of that too, I'll say, is the rivers that are referenced in this book. And I remember there was a line from *Apocalypse Logic* by Elissa Washuta, which is one of my favorite essays written by a native writer. She's Cowlitz.

There is this line that always stayed in my memory, which is that the river is not a metaphor. And it's because in this particular essay, which is a more sort of experimental essay type, she's talking about a real river in the real world that was sort of at risk of—I don't remember what type of development was happening there, what was potentially going to be spilled into the river. But these are real places.

And I like that idea that often when we write as writers we think about river as kind of a metaphor for a journey that a character goes on or something that they need to follow in order to see through. And while that applies to this book, I also had to reference the Elwha River, which is a real place that had the two largest dam removals in the world actually happened there and how the river delta just totally exploded with life and has changed so much in such a short amount of time.

And yeah. So there's just so much to sort of draw from real natural sciences and ecological relationships like that and to bring them into stories. And I just think that that makes it so much richer, and that's something I really tried to do with *The Sea in Winter*.

DR. DANA: So to jump from winter to summer to Chapter 1 of your other novel, *I Can Make This Promise*. It takes place on the 4th of July on the Tulalip reservation. And it is loud.

It's colorful. It's chaotic. It's fun. It's evocative. It's one of my favorite passages in this book.

CHRISTINE DAY: Thanks.

DR. DANA: Please tell me you're writing the scene from personal experience, especially with all the delicious food and fireworks.

CHRISTINE DAY: Oh yeah. That is a real place as well. There is this like big field on the Tulalip Reservation. Every 4th of July, it is transformed into what is known locally as Boom City.

And it really is—I mean, it's so much fun. And it is colorful and chaotic. And growing up, my parents would take me there pretty regularly.

I've also been there a few times just in my adulthood. I still live pretty close by. And I know that is just—it's something that so many people look forward to. And it's a big gathering for sure. And it's just so much fun.

DR. DANA: The main character of this story, Edie, eventually learns that she is named after her grandmother Edith, who has been kept secret from her. I'm curious to know whose story came first when you were drafting this novel, Edie or Edith, her grandmother or was it someone else entirely?

CHRISTINE DAY: So the origin story for *I Can Make This Promise*—this is my first published novel. It is not the first book that I wrote. For several years before I wrote *I Can Make This Promise*, I was trying to break into the YA market. I was writing a lot of speculative YA fiction. None of it will ever see the light of day.

I was basically just teaching myself how to write a full novel length manuscript. And I was testing the waters, trying to make connections with literary agents, and also just trying to figure out what types of stories I really wanted to tell. Because at the time I got started, I was like fresh out of high school just starting my college years. This was when the dystopian YA was just huge. I was very into *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. My very first manuscript that I attempted to write was a strange interpretation of a dystopian YA novel. There were lots of training scenes, although I don't remember what they were training for.

There was a lot of excitement and corruption. But like what was actually going on? I don't know. It's interesting to think that that's like what I was first trying to write.

Again, I was just trying to emulate what I really like to read. I mean, it's not my fault that I didn't know how to write a book yet. I was just figuring it all out. In the midst of that—and each time I would finish a manuscript and start sending it out to agents, only within a couple of weeks or so, I would fall out of love with whatever manuscript I had just turned in, which was kind of a sign of like, oh, I guess I might have been a little too quick to just try and get that one out into the world.

I'm not sure if this is actually the story I want to commit to yet, to really fight for to get published because you have to fight for whatever the book is that you want to bring into the world. It's not an easy process. There's just a lot of hurdles along the way.

But then as I was going through that trying to break into the speculative YA market, I came across this flyer from Penguin Random House for a publishing contest they were putting on in honor of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. And, basically, they were looking for unpublished, even unagented, diverse writers, people of marginalized backgrounds who wanted to write a realistic middle grade novel that in some way honored *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. They had a publishing contract up for grabs.

And I came across this flyer. I found out about this contest, and it basically changed my life. I did not get that publishing contract with them. But what happened was I was like, middle grade, now wait, most of my favorite books are middle grade now that I think about it.

And it's just such a rich incredible age for protagonists. I mean, I love coming of age stories. I love writing books that are about young people asking big questions. Middle grade is rife with it. But it has the slightly younger age than YA obviously.

But to me, I think that the sort of key difference between middle grade versus young adult books is that middle grade protagonists are learning about their place in the world and how they sort of fit into this bigger world, whereas young adult protagonists, teenagers, they have a better sense of who they are. But they're learning how to assert themselves into the world. For me, that's sort of the key difference.

And so as soon as I came across this publishing contract, I was like, well, if I were to write a contemporary realistic middle grade book and it had something to do with honoring your heritage and figuring that out, what perspective could I bring or what would I be interested in writing? And, basically, Edie's voice kind of popped into my head, and she never left. And that was how I basically started writing this manuscript.

And I cranked it out super-fast. It was very rough. But even that very extremely rough first draft that I wrote over the course of like four weeks because I just couldn't get her voice out of my head—and I just had to figure out who she was and what story she had to tell.

From that point on, I was like, this is it. This is going to be my first book. This is the one I'm going to fight for right here. It explores pre-Indian Child Welfare Act, adoption, and how generational trauma impacts future generations. And it also just explores a lot about Native girlhood in the 21st century and how she is kind of an ordinary kid in the Seattle area who is disconnected from her tribal communities and relations but finds her way back to them. And that's kind of—

DR. DANA: That is amazing because that was my next question.

CHRISTINE DAY: Really?

DR. DANA: Yes. I don't want to give away too many spoilers. But when Edie learns—what she learns about her grandmother is very difficult for her to hear. And yet she reaches through the pain and with the help of her family connects both with her grandmother and her identity as a Native person. Could you speak a little bit about those connections she makes?

CHRISTINE DAY: I sure can. A lot of it is very much inspired by my own family's history. My mother was a pre-ICWA adoptee. And she went through a pretty similar, not the same—it's all fictionalized—but a pretty similar path. And when she was in her early 20s where she basically— and this was pre-Internet, pre-any easier way to do this.

There was no Ancestry.com yet. There was no some of the ways that folks now are able to find their relatives by typing in their names on Facebook or something like that. My mom had

nothing but a last name and a general area of where her biological mother might have lived. And she and my dad literally drove up there.

This was kind of slightly the more rural area. They went into a convenience store and they asked, “Do you know anyone who has this name?” And they were like, “Oh yeah, they live over there” and gave my parents directions. And that was how my mom found her Native relatives was through basically just following a hunch and this desire that she had. She grew up in a very white suburb. When you flip through the pictures of my mom's yearbook, she is like the only non-white person throughout all of her years growing up in schools. And she just had so many questions about who she was and where she came from. And I think that's very common as well among adoptees and among Native people, even those who are connected to their folks.

So many of us have a lot of questions about how these histories have impacted us because a lot of these histories are just so painful that elders don't really talk about them. And I think that that was another thing that I just wanted to show through Edie's story is that her mother kind of dodges a lot of her questions. And it's not that she's trying to act with malice. It is literally that this is a bit too painful for her to really talk about.

And she's not sure if Edie is ready to hear it all. She doesn't mean to be doing her this huge disservice. But that's just how a lot of these sort of questions and just a lot of that trauma ends up being re-inherited.

This was definitely a story about being the one to dare to ask those questions and to go out on a limb to try and find your way back to whoever your people are. And, yeah, for Edie and her family, they basically go to Indianola.

DR. DANA: In addition to your novels, you've written a short story and an essay for two amazing publications. The ones I mentioned in your intro. I'm always curious to ask writers if their fiction writing feels different from their nonfiction personal essays.

CHRISTINE DAY: Ooh, that is a very interesting question. I like that. I really like the possibility of invention that comes with writing fiction. With nonfiction, it's just a different kind of vulnerable or it's just a different type of experience for sure. Or at least I suppose nonfiction personal because when I wrote Maria Tallchief's story for the *She Persisted* series, obviously, that was a lot of research I did. And I tried to honor her story in the best way that I could.

When I wrote a short essay that was just sort of about my own journey as a young burgeoning writer and as a person who was at that particular point in my life, I tried to make it very specific to my sort of journey through school and through just things that I had sort of faced until that point in my life. It feels almost like I created a little time capsule for anyone to sort of find. And you'll see kind of what grad school era Christine was thinking about.

Yeah, so it is a different sort of experience because I think it's easier to get more creative or to sort of just investigate more. I feel like I can say more through fiction than I can through nonfiction because my opinions about things tend to change all the time or sometimes I think I'm writing something in one way and it's coming across in a different way. And so with fiction, it's just so much more open-ended and not necessarily easier, but easier to, yeah, just say whatever.

DR. DANA: And I do want to just briefly touch on your biography of Maria Tallchief and just say that that is almost an early reader biography. It's illustrated, but so powerful. I can imagine that as a ballet dancer researching and writing about a ballet dancer that must have been also very personal for you.

CHRISTINE DAY: Oh, man. It was. It felt like a full-circle moment in my life. Because when I was maybe 11 years old or so, I did this summer program at the Pacific Northwest Ballet School in Bellevue where we had these sorts of ballet history seminars. After a morning full of doing our regular ballet technique classes, we would sort of gather in the studio and sit around and watch these black and white clips of prima ballerinas at their prime.

And Maria Tallchief was one of those dancers that we watched when I was a kid. And I remember my teacher handing out these little pamphlets about her and having this note that she was the first Native American prima ballerina and the first American prima ballerina, just period. That was such a transformative moment for me.

I was so excited because I was the one Native kid in my whole ballet school that I knew of. And it was just really incredible. I had known about her since then. And that particular memory of watching her as the firebird always stayed with me throughout my whole adolescence and everything.

And then when I was approached to write this book, it was pure luck because I just happened to know the right person at the right time because I was sort of coming up in the industry. Cynthia Leitich Smith recommended me for the project to Jill Santopolo who is the editor of the *She Persisted* series for Chelsea Clinton. And, basically, Jill reached out to me.

And at that point, my first book had only been announced. *I Can Make This Promise* had not gone on to win any awards. *The Sea in the Winter* I was just starting to work on it. And, basically, no one knew who I was or what I was up to or anything in the industry. And yet Jill Santopolo reached out to my agent and me and said, “Would Christine be interested in writing an early reader biography about Maria Tallchief?” And I just about fell out of my chair. It was one of the most surreal emails I ever received. It really felt like I had worked so hard to break into this industry. And as a kid, I had worked so hard at trying to become a dancer. But it felt like, wow, this moment of those two worlds sort of coming together for me in a way I never could have anticipated. I still get chills just thinking about it. Even though the book has come out and I've since done promotional events for it and stuff, it still doesn't feel totally real to me.

DR. DANA: So what projects are you working on now?

CHRISTINE DAY: Well, I have a middle grade book that is coming out next year, summer 2023. We don't have an exact release date. We have release season. It is going to be called *We Still Belong*. I hope that's it. I hope that's the final what will be—

DR. DANA: Title. Holding you to it. [LAUGHTER]

CHRISTINE DAY: —what will be the final title. We'll see. As I said, titles are difficult for me. But we really love this one. And we hope that it's going to stick and book will be published as. So we'll see. And I have another—I have another short story that has not been publicly announced yet. But I will say that it is going to be a part of a YA fantasy anthology. So I've made it. I'm going to have a speculative YA story out in the world. Hopefully, novels will follow.

But we'll see. I'm very, very excited about it because it is one of those things where I love, I love middle grade contemporary realistic books so much. But I also don't want to sort of become typecast as a specific type of writer.

I really want to just continue to push myself creatively and to sort of just follow whatever ideas feel the most exciting or new to me. And so, yeah, I hope to build a career where people sort of know what type of tone or what type of experience they can kind of expect from the book from me, but also still hopefully be surprised along the way. So that's what I'm aiming for.

DR. DANA: Christine Day, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

CHRISTINE DAY: Thank you so much for having me. This was such a great conversation. You ask such great questions about my work, too. I really appreciate it.

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