

The BiblioFiles: Jacqueline West

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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 our guest is multiple award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author Jacqueline West.

If the names Horatio, Leopold and Harvey (excuse me, Agent 1-800!) elicit feelings of delight, and the name McMartin gives you shudders of fear, then you are already familiar with West's acclaimed *Books of Elsewhere* series. If you have not read them, polish up your spectacles and get ready for an epic five book journey.

When that series concluded, West continued to write for middle grade readers with *The Collectors*, its sequel *A Storm of Wishes*, and *The Story Pirates Presents: Digging Up Danger*. She's also authored two young adult novels: *Dreamers Often Lie*, and *Last Things*.

West's most recent novel is *Long Lost*, a story within a story about two sets of sisters from different times, connected by a book that mysteriously writes itself, revealing a terrible secret about the small town of Lost Lake, and bringing the past back to life.

Jacqueline West is undeniably a master crafter of suspense, spookiness, intrigue, adventure, and unique forms of magic. Reading through her catalog of books in preparation for this interview, however, I realized that she is also the master of thresholds. Her characters constantly cross them, physically and mentally, alone or together, both in fantasy and reality. And it's a testament to her incredible writing abilities that each crossing feels special, intimate, meaningful, and significant.

Jacqueline West, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, I'm delighted to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

DR. DANA: You've written eleven novels for children and teens. I'm going to try to touch on everything, but if you don't mind starting way back, to the very beginning, when maybe the first draft of *The Books of Elsewhere: The Shadows* was just forming, and tell us where you were as a writer.

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, wow, well, I began writing what would eventually turn into *The Shadows*, my first published book. And it started *The Books of Elsewhere*, when I was a college student. I was in my undergrad years, living in Wisconsin, and working multiple part time jobs at the same time. One of them was as a dinner theater actress. My college degree is actually in vocal performance. I thought I was going to be an opera singer.

And I was writing this book in between everything else, sometimes literally in the dressing room of that theater during intermissions, sometimes on the bus to and from campus. And it was a complete secret. Nobody knew, including my close family, that I was writing. Because writing was the thing that I had kind of decided I was going to put on the back burner while I got this degree and went off and into the musical world. And it took me a long time to figure out that was not the path I actually wanted to be on.

So as a writer, I was very young. I had published some poetry, some of it even anonymously because I was very into that whole secrecy thing. So no, I was just sort of figuring out who I was going to be as a writer, and what kind of forms and genres I wanted to experiment with. And so that book, what became *The Shadows*, was the first thing I had ever tried to write for children. It was the first—yeah, first children's novel I ever completed, although it took me eight years from the starting point to get to the ending. It was a long, long process, but that's where I was as a writer.

DR. DANA: How had you changed as a writer by the time the fifth and final book of the series concluded, because this was a *New York Times* bestseller.

JACQUELINE WEST: Yeah, my entire life changed. I began the book, as I said, as a 22-year-old college student, and finished it as a full-time writer. When my first book got an agent and got picked up by Penguin, who said, “well, how about we turn this book into a series?” I jumped at the chance.

And so that's the point when we decided, "oh, this could be much larger than one book or two, it's going to be a five-book series." And so, yeah, it was thirteen years after I began writing that book that I was wrapping up writing Book Five. And everything in my life and in my process had changed by that point.

Everything that I did with *The Shadows* I was doing for the first time, working with an agent, working with an editor, working with publicity, learning how revisions work, and how grueling that can be, but also learning what you're capable of as a writer. And with each subsequent book, I felt a little bit more like, OK, now I sort of know what I'm doing.

And by the time the fifth book came out, I had been living with and writing about these characters for so long that they felt utterly real to me. And I know I could have just gone on doing that, putting them in different situations, and knowing exactly what they would say and how they would react. But by the time I was done, I was also very ready to start something brand new, something from scratch.

DR. DANA: Speaking of characters, which cat received the most fan mail?

JACQUELINE WEST: [LAUGHING] Oh, Harvey, absolutely. Harvey, far and away. He tends to be most kid readers' favorite character, and I completely understand. He was also the most fun to write, so that just makes sense.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] Interesting, a background in theater. Harvey, I see it.

JACQUELINE WEST: Yes, I know. A lot of kids ask, oh, is Olive based on you? And I am not actually that similar to Olive. Embarrassingly, I am much closer to Harvey. I was that kid who was in a different costume every day, pretending I was someone else. "Don't call me that, my real name is..." yes, that was me as a kid.

DR. DANA: Moving from cats to squirrels, there is an incredibly funny one in your books *The Collectors* and *A Storm of Wishes*.

JACQUELINE WEST: Yes, Barnavelt the squirrel.

DR. DANA: In fact, most of your stories have animals as pets, but some are famously more supernatural. And I'm curious to know if you develop these animal characters like you develop your human characters. Do they have a distinctly different feel when you're writing them?

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Well, I wouldn't say they feel different from my human characters. Essentially, they feel just like a human character to me because they have the same kinds of thoughts, and emotions, and capacities. They're often so much more fun to write because there's just complete freedom.

With a talking animal, with whatever magical gifts it might have, it's just so much fun to concoct. So, yeah, I tend to lean pretty hard into the talking animals. My next book has some as well. I think *Long Lost* is my only middle grade that doesn't have any talking animals in it.

DR. DANA: But it does have a supernatural—

JACQUELINE WEST: It does.

DR. DANA: —one which—which that counts too. It's almost—well, we'll get to *Long Lost*, because that felt like such an incredibly organic and natural step from all your previous books. I'm excited to talk about that a little later. *The Book of Elsewhere* is about a magical realm that exists inside the paintings of a house, which is just awesome.

But *The Collectors* books involve an elaborate world co-existing, and at times being wild and uncontained in our world. In some ways, it just felt like you took the lid off, and you went big. So where did the inspiration for this come from?

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, *The Collectors* was a giant jigsaw puzzle. The first pieces that I had—I knew I wanted to have this boy, Van, my central character, who was going to be good at noticing things that other people don't notice. He was going to be a collector, somebody who's always finding little treasures.

And I think, in part, that probably came from my work as a teacher. Every time you're around small children, the perspectives that they have, the things that they notice about the ordinary world that adults tend to brush over or ignore, because they're seeing things for the first time, it's so different, and it's so inspiring.

Van is that kind of person. He's noticing things often as though it's for the first time, or in ways that other people don't see. Van and his talent and his hobby came first. And then into that, I knew I wanted to use wish magic. I had been writing a series of poetry all about superstitions, and so many of our daily superstitions involve wishes.

And that idea, that we're all using magic, some of us every day. Every time we lose an eyelash, or the clock says 11:11, or whatever other little superstitions we might practice, we're using magic in the everyday world in this very casual way, and not really thinking about why or how that magic might actually unfold. And so I wanted to play with that too. And so Van and wish magic braided together, and then the setting—yes, the realm of *The Collectors*, the sort of underworld, grew, and grew, and grew from there.

DR. DANA: You mentioned poetry, and I did notice that you've had poetry published and released collections, but I went back in all your books and noticed that in all your middle grade and YA, there's not a single poem.

JACQUELINE WEST: [LAUGHS]

DR. DANA: Do you ever connect those two worlds?

JACQUELINE WEST: I think the closest I've gotten is in *Last Things*, because I did get to write song lyrics in that case. And so, yeah, in those cases, the song lyrics felt much more like writing poetry, like creating this snapshot, this brief image, instead of something that has to have that whole complicated narrative structure. And so getting to step out of the narrative and give these little moments, that was really refreshing. But, yeah, that's the closest I've ever come. In general, I don't know if I'm going to go farther than that. I've never been inspired to try a whole novel in verse.

DR. DANA: Yeah.

JACQUELINE WEST: To me, they're separate parts of my brain, I guess.

DR. DANA: You have two young adult books, *Last Things*, which is about Anders, a teen whose desire for fame leads him to dark supernatural places, and *Dreamers Often Lie*, in which a girl

named Jaye fractures her skull, and then finds herself surrounded by and conversing with the characters from Shakespeare.

I'm especially interested in *Dreamers Often Lie*, and I'm wondering, was it intimidating to be writing dialogue for such huge literary figures like Hamlet, Romeo, Ophelia, and even Shakespeare, himself?

JACQUELINE WEST: [LAUGHING] Uh-huh, absolutely.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] No pressure, Hamlet.

JACQUELINE WEST: No pressure at all. No, as I was doing it, I was never telling myself this has to live up to Shakespeare's standards. Because the characters, of course, are all actually parts of Jaye, herself. I wasn't trying to expand on Shakespeare's actual plays or actual characters. These are just elements of her own life, her own personality that are manifesting.

Although, when I—in my early drafts, I was trying to write Shakespeare so that each of his speeches was in iambic pentameter, which is just a gigantic headache. And finally, I realized, why am I doing this to myself? I'm sure Shakespeare, himself, didn't walk around speaking in iambic pentameter. So, yeah, I cut that out, and then got to write it in a bit more natural way. But I wrote that book while I was working as a high school English teacher. I was in a tiny high school where I was the entire English department. So I was teaching *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* to freshmen in the morning, and then *Hamlet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* to seniors in the afternoon. And I was also the drama advisor.

All of these Shakespeare works braided together with modern-day teenage life for me. And that's really what I was trying to do, is make Shakespeare and the characters still connect in all these very personal, I hope, accessible ways to a modern teenager's life and world.

DR. DANA: Looking at the publication dates of some of your works, you're working on multiple projects at once, correct?

JACQUELINE WEST: Always.

DR. DANA: Wow.

JACQUELINE WEST: Yeah, I usually have four or five things going at a time. I think of them as the pots on each burner of the stove. And that's what's comfortable for me. Because whenever I get stuck on one thing, just run out of steam, or hit a wall, I can switch to something else. And then I still feel like I'm moving forward. And often, all that I need is that time in another world so it can comfortably go back to the first one.

And so, yeah, there's a lot of juggling, but to me, that's refreshing, to step from a middle grade fantasy into a YA horror or whatever else I happen to be doing at the moment.

DR. DANA: And how do you find time to do other things? [LAUGHING]

JACQUELINE WEST: [LAUGHING] I don't.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] What's the secret, Jacqueline West?

JACQUELINE WEST: There's nothing else. I mean, hobbies, my house is a mess, and I write, and I take care of children, and that's it.

DR. DANA: You heard it here exclusively, her house is a mess.

JACQUELINE WEST: That's right.

DR. DANA: Everyone feel better.

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah—no, I'm not going to pretend otherwise. And there was—I mean, the year that I released four books was 2019. That's been my busiest year ever. And it's because that was the year when my first child finally started preschool.

And so suddenly, once again, I had both hands free for a little while each day. And it was just this pent-up amount of ideas and energy that I can pour out into a whole bunch of books at once. So yeah, that's why there are little waves. It all depends on what else is going on.

DR. DANA: OK. Finally, we come to your most recent novel, *Long Lost*, which is about a family that moves to a small town with secrets. It's a delightful slow burn that reels you in, and then it totally unleashes. I could not put it down.

I mentioned in my intro that you were a master at creating thresholds, and that your characters pass over these thresholds repeatedly. In your earlier books, it seems as these were decidedly magical, but *Long Lost* has a more organic realistic feel. I'm wondering if you would read a passage that demonstrates this.

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, I would love to, yes. This is a section from about halfway through the book, where Fiona, my central character, is exploring this town where she and her family have just moved. She has now realized that the book that she'd discovered in the local public library, this old mystery novel, that settings within the novel seem to match many places in her new hometown. She notices street names and landmarks that they have in common. And gradually, figures out that perhaps the whole story in this book is true. So now she's exploring, on foot, in person, the places in this town where the story was set. So this is Fiona.

“Early on Saturday morning, the town of Lost Lake was even quieter than usual. Most businesses were closed for the day. Only a few cars rolled by as Fiona peddled along Main Street.

She tugged out the map and pinned it against her handlebars. If she rode past the library to the bend in Old Mill Road, cut through the woods, and then followed the river northward to its narrowest point, she should find Parson's Bridge.

Beyond the library, at the end of the row of stolid old mansions, Fiona steered off the sidewalk. She pedaled across the lawn of a closed law firm and into the thick trees beyond. She hid her bike in a patch of ferns. Then, on foot, she hurried into the woods.

The ground quickly began to slope beneath her. Fiona jogged downward, catching herself on low branches. Already she could hear the rushing sound of water. A few more steps through the lace of leaves, and the river sparkled into view.

It looked just like she'd imagined. The water was greenish silver and fast, sloshing along its rocky banks, and the woods were thick all around. Fiona wondered which of the towering trees had been here a hundred years ago. She pictured Hazel and Pearl walking beside her, the heels of

their button boots leaving matching prints in the earth. She imagined them breathing the same damp air.

If *The Lost One* had been set right here, there had to be some sort of hint to find. Some sign. Some trace. Something that could point her toward the missing ending. Spreading her arms for balance, Fiona hurried to the edge of the water.

She perched on a flat rock and looked around. To her right, the river widened before vanishing around a bend. And upriver, just a few yards away, there stood an old wooden bridge.

Parson's Bridge.

Invisible icy fingers brushed the back of Fiona's neck.

She rushed along the bank and onto the bridge. The wooden boards thumped softly under her shoes, the river shushing and sparkling beneath.

The woods on the far side were dense. As Fiona stepped off the bridge, their shadows swept over her like gray silk, cool and light, covering everything. She dug through her backpack and pulled out the stick of chalk. With it, she drew a bumpy white X on a nearby tree trunk, just in case she needed to find her way back.

Fiona hiked onward, keeping the river beside her, marking trees as she went. The farther she walked, the quieter the woods became. It got easier and easier to imagine that this was the Lost Lake of a century ago—or the Lost Lake of a strange old book.

At last she reached a patch of forest where the pines grew tall and straight, and ferns and tiny white flowers caught the droplets of sunlight that slipped through their boughs. Fiona stopped and took a long look around. This could be the sister's Enchanted Forest. Right now, Fiona could be standing on the spot where Hazel had disappeared.

Fiona turned in a slow circle, trying to observe everything at once, the way a researcher should. What might Pearl or Hazel have noticed, hidden among the ancient trees? What might they have seen? What might they have thought, but never had the chance to say?

And then beside her, in the shadows, something stirred.”

DR. DANA: Your description of the forest is so extensive and beautiful.

JACQUELINE WEST: Well, thank you.

DR. DANA: And there's a number of thresholds here. There's her leaving her bike behind. There's the bridge. There's the deepening of the forest. This could be any of us walking the woods and not realizing that in that moment, with that last sentence, we're about to be taken to an entirely different place.

JACQUELINE WEST: Right.

DR. DANA: I won't be giving away any spoilers. And I certainly mentioned animals, and that this has a more natural and organic feel. There's—its supernatural, perhaps magical as well, but it definitely—it's a slower burn. So writing this, did it feel that way, as well? Was that intentional?

JACQUELINE WEST: Yes, it did feel that way. I knew that with this book I wanted to root it very firmly in reality, in what felt like a real contemporary kid's life. And then the first doorway, as I saw it, is Fiona entering that local public library, which is this treasure house of stories. And that leads her into the book itself, which is another threshold. It's one thing after another opening to her.

And the farther Fiona goes, the deeper she steps into this other story, the more the world around her and the possibilities expand. But yeah, I did want it to feel at first very natural, very set in reality. And so the use of forests, and rivers, and the geological plant-based world all around her, I wanted that to feel tactile and real. And it's really part of the story as well. It's part of this town. And it's part of the past of this town. All of those things also played into the story that Fiona is reading, as well as the one that she's living. So, yeah, trying to braid all of those things together was the trick.

DR. DANA: I'm sure places like this existed for you when you were a kid, but do any of these places exist for you now? It could be a place, it could be a muse. For example, I believe it was Stephen King who said that his muse is a man in the basement, muttering.

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, that's creepy.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] Yeah.

JACQUELINE WEST: Wow. I think places are often my muse. My stories so often begin with settings, like that's the seed of the idea. That was the seed of *The Books of Elsewhere*. It was a real house in the town where I grew up that I used to see as a child through the school bus window.

And *Long Lost*, the seed of *Long Lost*, came from this—just a crooked street sign that I drove past one day. And I suddenly had the idea of a girl in a small-town library noticing street names in common within the book that she's reading in the town where she lives.

And so Lost Lake, the town within *Long Lost*, is based a little bit on some real towns that I've visited in New England. But, of course, much of it is just concocted. But, yeah, I think places like this do still exist for me, which, I guess, makes me really lucky. I'm a sucker for houses. I just love to imagine what's going on behind other people's closed doors. I'm one of those people who lurks on real estate sites just to get peeks inside of other people's living rooms, and kitchens, and basements.

Because the things that happen inside those personal spaces are just endlessly fascinating to me. Getting to explore any new place, whether it's a house, a town, a forest, I'm always thinking about, oh, what might have happened here? What could happen here? And that's where so many of the things that I write come from.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now? Five books, six books? [LAUGHING]

JACQUELINE WEST: Four different burners.

DR. DANA: And a crock pot? [LAUGHING]

JACQUELINE WEST: Exactly, something's simmering slowly. Something else is scorching. [LAUGHING] But right now I have a YA horror, which is with some editors. It's out on submission at the moment. And it's a book that I really love. And usually, when I finish something I'm completely out of love with it. I think it's a good sign that I still believe in this one. We'll see what happens with that.

I'm working on a middle grade dark fantasy called *Until the Witch Comes Back*. We'll see if it gets to keep that title. Which is the first thing that I've ever written that's not set in the real world, in present time. It's more of a fairy tale feel. And I think it's a direct response to the pandemic life that we've been living. I started writing it during all of this, and I think it was just this way to step out of this world entirely. So I'm at work on that.

I have another middle grade that is set in the present, more contemporary, more realistic, and again, draws into the natural world elements. That's kind of on the back burner, but I've got a couple of chapters of that sketched out. And I have another YA that I'm halfway through, and that's just going to sit and simmer for a while. And we'll see when I go back to it if it's turned into anything edible. We'll see.

DR. DANA: Jacqueline West, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

JACQUELINE WEST: Oh, it's been my pleasure. Thank you again for having me.

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