

The BiblioFiles: Lois Lowry

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

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Lois Lowry.

In 1977, Lois Lowry published *A Summer to Die*, a story about family, loss, life, and hope. It was Lowry's first children's book, written in her characteristically frank, feeling and beautiful prose. It won the International Reading Association's award for fiction in 1979. That same year, Lowry published the first in her now famous series of Anastasia Krupnik books, and the world of children's literature was never the same again.

In her long and distinguished career, Lowry has written 45 books and been awarded two Newbery Medals for *Number the Stars* in 1990, and *The Giver* in 1994. Her unabashed exploration of difficult subject matter has also made her a frequently challenged children's book author. In 2015, she was awarded the Free Speech Defender award by the National Coalition Against Censorship.

While it is difficult to summarize the decades long career of a luminary who has produced not one, but several seminal books in the history of children's literature, two things that stand out are Lowry's versatility, and her respect for her reader's level of understanding. Versatility in that she can write hysterically funny books, as well as deeply poignant ones, and respect for readers in that she doesn't shy away from difficult, embarrassing, uncomfortable, or socially charged topics. Instead, she speaks to the reader as an equal. It is the ultimate form of literary empathy; one that has the power to change a reader for life.

Lois Lowry, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

LOIS LOWRY: Thank you. Nice to be with you.

DR. DANA: This is a bit unconventional, but I'm wondering if we could begin the interview with a passage from your autobiography, *Looking Back*. The book contains a series of photos and essays about your life and your inspirations. The part I'd love you to read is titled "Absolute Innocence."

LOIS LOWRY: [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: And it begins with a quote from your book, *Autumn Street*, which was published in 1980.

LOIS LOWRY: "Absolute Innocence" is what I titled this passage, and the quotation from my book, *Autumn Street* is this: "My eyes were very large and very blue. I looked at them for a long time, looking solemnly back at me." The photograph of me in 1943 is when I'm six years old and looking with very large, very blue eyes at the camera.

And then the essay that accompanies that is this—and I will add that this is a true story.

"One chilly day when I was in first grade, walking home alone after school, taking a shortcut through an alley behind my house, I found what I thought was a very cold mouse, asleep.

I felt sorry for him and thought that if only I could get him warm, he would wake up and do cute little mousy things, and perhaps I would be allowed to keep him as a pet. I had never had a pet. My baby brother had just been born and was something of a disappointment as a playmate, so I yearned for a lovable creature who would scamper about at my heels and learn tricks.

Very carefully, I picked him up. At the time, I had not yet read *Stuart Little*; so I was not expert at mouseology. I did realize that he was rather large for a mouse; but *The Rats of NIMH* had not yet been written, so I hadn't read that either, and didn't know that there were other, larger rodents in the same general family as mice.

I carried him home cradled in one arm, and his tail, long, and bare and very stiff, stuck out. He looked vulnerable and homely, with two visible front teeth—my own were missing at the time—and as I walked, I began to think of names for him and to picture how he would come when I called.

Warming him against my heavy jacket didn't waken him. Clearly my jacket sleeve wasn't warm enough. So when I entered the house through the back door, into the kitchen, and heard my mother busy upstairs with the baby, I carefully turned on the oven. I knew enough to set it to a low temperature so that it would warm and waken my mouse gradually. Then I laid him gently inside the oven.

I guess I got busy with my paper dolls and forgot to check on him for a while. I don't remember, exactly. But that would explain why it was my mother who first noticed that there was something baking.

I have always felt that if I had only had a chance to explain, and to prepare her a bit, it wouldn't have been such a surprise to her when she opened the oven that day. I felt that if she had just looked at my very innocent face, my wide-open, completely uncriminal eyes—instead of *screaming* at me, for no reason whatsoever—the whole incident would have been handled better.

I have always felt that she overreacted." [LAUGHTER]

It makes me chuckle to remember that. Now my mother has been dead for years, and she was a wonderful mother, but I do remember the incident of the mouse/rat.

DR. DANA: One of the things I love about the passage is how you were basing your observation of the mouse on *Stuart Little*.

LOIS LOWRY: Oh, yes, and I don't remember when I encountered *Stuart Little*, but many years later he became a favorite of mine. Maybe I've always had a thing about mice. And as you, no doubt, know now, I once wrote a book in which all the characters were mice.

DR. DANA: Yes. Can you tell us some of the other books that influenced you when you were growing up?

LOIS LOWRY: Well, there would have been many. My mother had been a teacher before she married, but she never worked after she had children. But we grew up in a house that was filled with children's books, and she was a wonderful reader aloud of children's stories. I also was a very early reader myself, so I was most often to be found curled up with a book.

But, of course, children's books in those days, there were weren't as many wonderful ones as there are now. I do remember—because I still have a copy of it—one of my favorites as a child, and probably no child today has even heard of it, but it was called *Humphrey*. And then it was subtitled—I don't have it here in front of me—but I think it was "The Life of a Turtle." And it goes through 100 years of Humphrey's life as the world around him changes and progresses. I was fascinated by Humphrey, and also by the spelling of his name, because I was just beginning to read, and I perceived that the PH in the middle of his name was an odd phenomenon because it was pronounced like F. And, of course, our English language has all these idiosyncrasies, but at that age—and I would have been four when I was learning to read about Humphrey—one just accepts those things and goes on, and then very soon thereafter I realized that telephone had the same odd little middle part with a PH. So Humphrey is one of my fond memories.

And I also loved the *Mary Poppins* books. I don't know when they were published, but they were around in my childhood. And I was indiscriminate, because, for example, I adored the *Bobbsey Twins*—all 27 volumes of them, or however many there were. And those, frankly, are terrible books. [LAUGHTER] I've gotten some old copies and re-read them, and realized what bad books they are, but I didn't notice that when I was a kid. I loved them.

DR. DANA: Also in your autobiography, you mention wanting to pass books like *The Secret Garden* along to your children and grandchildren, but I'm curious, have any of them read and reacted to your books?

LOIS LOWRY: When I began writing for kids, my own children were teenagers, I think. My first book, *A Summer to Die*, was published in 1977, and my youngest child was born in 1962, so he would have been—I'm so bad at math—that makes him 15, I suppose. So they would have glanced at my books with interest and amusement, but they weren't curling up with my books as literature the way perhaps later my grandchildren did—some of them at least. And my youngest grandchild is now 15, so they're beyond that age as well. But when they were young, my grandchildren, not my children, they not only read my books and sometimes professed to love some of them, but they would also haul me into their classrooms and exhibit me, like show and tell. "Here's my grandmother. She writes books."

DR. DANA: You mention *A Summer to Die*, and in the back, in the bio, it mentions that you hitchhiked around Nova Scotia interviewing lobster fishermen for a newspaper article. So I've got to know, what was the article about? Was it about lobster fishermen?

LOIS LOWRY: No. I have to think back a long way. Before I began writing for kids, I was doing a lot of writing for various magazines and newspapers, and I wrote some things for the travel section of the Sunday *New York Times*, and I did a lengthy article about Nova Scotia for them. Hitchhike is a misnomer, and probably I put that out there, but it's a lie. [LAUGHTER] I actually hitched a ride on a tour bus, so I guess that's a kind of hitchhiking—a fancy tour bus full of people from all over the country, I suppose, was doing a tour of Nova Scotia, and they allowed me to ride along just in order to do that article. I have hitchhiked in my life, but I didn't actually hitchhike in Nova Scotia.

DR. DANA: The *Anastasia Krupnik* series, the *Tate Family* series, the *Gooney Bird* series, and standalone books like *The Willoughbys*, these are incredibly funny. At the opposite end of the spectrum are books like *Autumn Street*, *The Giver*, *Quartet*, *The Silent Boy*, and *Number the Stars*. Is it more difficult to write funny books or serious books?

LOIS LOWRY: I don't think there's any degree of difference in the difficulty. It just depends on the mindset, what I set out to do, and what I sit down with, and then I fall into that mode. I would think I would not be able to work on the two things simultaneously and go back and forth between a funny book and a very serious book, because once I enter the world as a book, then I live there. And that's a little hard to describe, but I really become permeated with the life within that book. The characters become very real to me. So, when I enter the world of *The Silent Boy*, I would not be able to jump from there on Thursday into *Anastasia Krupnik*. So once I begin a book and know what kind of book it's going to be, and the tone that it will have, then I stay there until it's done.

DR. DANA: Do you find that, for example with *The Giver* quartet, that world is dystopia, and it doesn't really resolve fully until the final book, which span a number of years in between their publication—do you find if you're immersed in this world with a book, it's difficult to be in this dystopia, that it's unresolved? Or if you know the end point, you can kind of see the light?

LOIS LOWRY: Well, the first book, *The Giver*, which had an ambiguous—I guess would be the word—ending, was ambiguous only to the readers. To me, it felt resolved and finished. I was somewhat surprised when so many readers began to complain that they wanted to know how it ended, because I thought it was quite clear how it ended. But at any rate, it was probably because of those many, many letters—or, of course, most often emails—asking that question that I began to think some years later about writing more about those characters, and that world, and that time. I hadn't started out with the intention of writing further books.

It kind of surprises me now when I hear people writing—they set out to write a trilogy, knowing from the get-go that they're going to write three books, because that would be overwhelming to me. I set out to write one book. And then this particular instance of *The Giver*, many years later I began to perceive that there was more to be said about that time and that world.

Of course now that I'm blathering on, I've forgotten what your original question was. Oh, yes. Whether I entered a world of ambiguity and irresolution. Each of those books—I'm thinking back now to what form they took—*Gathering Blue* was the second one. Again, I get letters from kids—and still they come even these books have been published some years ago—asking what happened to her after that book. And, of course, now I'm able to point out that she does appear in a later book, so you can find out by reading the other book. But to me, it never seems unfinished. I guess because I can always picture the continuance of it in my own imagination, and I forget—I lose track of the fact that maybe readers don't, and they want to know more.

DR. DANA: So you mentioned you didn't start it as a series. With the *Anastasia Krupnik* books, was there no intention for that to be a series?

LOIS LOWRY: No. Not at all.

DR. DANA: Wow.

LOIS LOWRY: And in fact, in the first book she's ten years old and in fourth grade, and each chapter is a kind of complete little short story. Each chapter has a sort of beginning, middle, and end, as opposed to a novel, which generally has an ongoing trajectory. Each chapter leads to the next, to the next, to the next with things unresolved. But if you were to go back and read that first *Anastasia* book, you would see that each issue is resolved within each chapter. And then it concludes. It concludes with a happy ending, the birth of the baby brother, and I had no intention of writing further books about her.

But again, it was readers. Readers latch on to a book that they like, or most often a character that they like, and ask for more. And so I think there were probably—I'd have to look back at a chronology—I think there were probably other books before I went on to do a second one about *Anastasia*, and then a third, and then a fourth, and a fifth. And I think I ended up with nine of them. And I actually had a tenth one partially written when the publisher told me, no, nine was enough. So I still have a little bit about the Krupniks in my computer.

And it's kind of funny, because at the time that I was writing those books, it was the days when I wrote it on a typewriter, and computers were not the ubiquitous thing that they've since become. And so her family does not have computers, and her father writes on a typewriter, and her little brother, Sam, begins to learn to read and write by using his dad's typewriter. But in the tenth book, which was never completed, finally they get a computer. And, of course, it causes all sorts of problems for them.

DR. DANA: Many of your books, even the early ones, contain subjects that are still considered taboo for children's books, and some of this is quite humorous. In *The One Hundredth Thing About Caroline*, for example, Caroline mentions that her single mother tried joining a gourmet eating club in order to meet some men, but all the men in the class ended up dating each other. So I laughed, and then I paused, and then I checked the publication year and it was 1983.

LOIS LOWRY: That would have been quite shocking then, wouldn't it?

DR. DANA: Yeah. That sort of comment isn't typical of books in the 80s. Did you ever get pressure?

LOIS LOWRY: I don't remember the publisher, the editor, even raising a question about it. What year did you say that was published?

DR. DANA: 1983.

LOIS LOWRY: OK. That's interesting to me, now thinking about it, because I was divorced in 1977. So I think I had gone through a little of what Caroline's mother was going through, and maybe that's why I stuck it in that book. That's kind of funny. I'm not sure that these days that would be taboo.

DR. DANA: Did you...

LOIS LOWRY: I do remember—there was a question raised about that manuscript—not about the men dating each other, but toward the end of that book. There's the scene where the protagonist, if I remember correctly, she's 11, and her brother is 13, perhaps, and mom has gone out, maybe on a date, I don't know. The girl, the protagonist, cooks frozen dinners for herself and her brother. And they're talking while they sit down to eat these frozen dinners that have been, I suppose put in the oven, and I don't know that they even had a microwave in those days. The boy, the brother, says, "This chicken sucks. It's ice cold." The editor asked me to take out the word "sucks"—that verb—which he thought would be deemed offensive.

And the book hadn't yet been published, of course, and I happened to be speaking to a classroom of kids, maybe sixth graders. They were asking about the publishing process, and I described some of the things an editor does. I described this scene and said the editor had just said I should take that word out. I asked the kids, if you were eating a dinner and it turned out your chicken was still frozen, what would you say? Because the editor had suggested I change it to "stinks"—this chicken stinks. So I said, what do you think? Let's take a vote. Does the chicken suck, or does the chicken stink? And, of course, they all voted for sucks, and so the editor kept it in. And nobody's ever objected to it.

DR. DANA: Can you tell us a little bit about your experience and beliefs when it comes to censorship?

LOIS LOWRY: Well, you know, I've been a victim of—not so much censorship, although that's happened occasionally—but certainly my books have been challenged over and over again many, many times, and called into question, and votes have been taken, and there have been public arguments and school board meetings. I try to be very careful about what I write. I try to be very aware of who I'm writing for, and I don't censor myself. I write down what I think is the most honest portrayal of a particular set of circumstances, but nonetheless some things have been called into question.

I think censorship is a very, very dangerous thing, and kids have often asked me about it. Sometimes they have school assignments to write about censorship, and I always point out to

them how situations like pre-World War II in Germany when Hitler was coming into power. One of the first things that happened is censorship—that people are not allowed to say or write what they're feeling, and the government takes control over what's being written. That's a very dangerous situation. And, of course, it's prohibited by our Constitution, so I have very strong feelings about that.

At the same time, I do try to write both with honesty and integrity, but with respect for people's feelings. I would never write a gratuitously profane book, for example, in order to sell a lot of copies. So I'm careful about what I write, but I am an advocate for freedom of speech.

DR. DANA: Do you have any projects you're working on now?

LOIS LOWRY: I just finished a very interesting project, but it's for adults, and perhaps that's why it's interesting, because it's very different for me. I'll just tell you about it briefly, because it doesn't fall into the topic of our conversation. There's an artist named Linden Frederick, who is a well-known painter, and he's done a series of 15 paintings, and each is a scene at night, and the title of this project of his is "Night Stories." And 15 writers—some very well-known names, plus me—have each been given a painting and were to write a story about it, or from it. And so I have just completed mine, and the paintings and stories will be exhibited in a gallery in New York next May, and then I assume they will be a book. But it's a project for adults, and the other writers are adult writers, like Ann Patchett is one, and Dennis Lehane, and other well-known writers.

That's very different for me to write for an adult audience, and it's been fun. I've completed that now, so I'm going back to my real work. And what I'm currently doing is what will be, I believe, number seven in the *Gooney Bird* series, which is to take her through an entire school year. And so this book is the April book. And I've got to finish that up soon, it's overdue.

And then I have another book that I wrote, and that the publisher was uncertain about, and I'm going to redo it because I'm still in love with it, and that's oddly a suspense novel, which I've never written before. Kind of a thriller. So maybe that will never be published, maybe they won't like it when I redo it, but nonetheless I'm working on that.

DR. DANA: I'd like to finish by asking you to read another passage from *Looking Back*, and this one is titled "Giving," and it begins with a quote from *The Giver* which, of course, won the Newbery award in 1994.

LOIS LOWRY: Yeah. OK.

The passage that it begins with from *The Giver* is this-- "Jonas had not yet opened any of the books. But he read the titles here and there, and knew that they contained all of the knowledge of centuries, and that one day they would belong to him."

Then the next passage is from my own life, and there's a picture of me in 1940. I'm three years old looking—I'm trying to describe the look on my face—kind of intently at a book. And the

passage that accompanies that is, "The knowledge of centuries. Here I am, three years old, hunched over a picture book, trying to figure out the simple words that create a caption."

The next picture is my oldest grandson in 1984. My grandson, James, who is now all grown up and married. But this passage, after showing a picture of him looking with absolute delight at a book, says, "My grandson, James, ten months old, barely upright, is looking with absolute glee at a book his mother is holding. The knowledge of the centuries. Actually, I think it was a picture of a teddy bear that resembled his own beloved Bear-Bear."

Then finally, 1995, is a picture of my late husband holding my granddaughter, who at that time was two years old, and they're reading together a book by—I think by Bill Martin Jr.—and it says, "My two-year-old granddaughter, finger in her mouth, is mesmerized by a book called *The Maestro Plays*. She hasn't any idea what a maestro is. But she loves the sound of the words as her grandfather reads them: 'Busily!' Nadine giggles. 'Dizzily!'"

And then it has a quotation from—again, from *The Giver*. "Jonas looks at the books of the Giver, and realizes that one day they will be his."

And then I go on to say in response to that, "I have come to believe that all of us, as we write, or read, or draw... as we hold the pages of a book tilted so that a little one can see... as we choose and wrap a book as a gift for a child... as we provide privacy and a comfortable chair, or a favorite book on a table beside a guest room bed... as we sift through memories, sort them out and see their meaning... and as we look back and say to a child, "I remember—" we do, in fact, hold the knowledge of centuries. And we all become Givers."

DR. DANA: Lois Lowry, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today.

LOIS LOWRY: Oh, you're quite welcome. It's been a pleasure to be with you.

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