

The BiblioFiles: Tom Bodett

Premiere date: February 4, 2012

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

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. My guest is Tom Bodett, author of *Williwaw!* and *Norman Tuttle on the Last Frontier*.

In the book *Williwaw!*, 13-year-old September Crane and 11-year-old brother Ivan are in a situation most kids dream about. Their dad has trusted them to take care of themselves while he earns much-needed money on a commercial fishing boat. So instead of going to Aunt Nelda and Uncle Spitz's horrible farm, September and Ivan are home alone for two whole weeks.

Alone takes on a different meaning when you consider that the family lives in Alaska in a cabin so far in the wilderness, they need a boat to get to the closest town and only have two radios to communicate with the outside world. When Ivan fries both radios while trying to hook up his hand-held video game, it starts a chain of events that ends with the children alone on the water, facing one of the most dangerous storms Alaska offers-- a williwaw-- the same type of storm that claimed their mother's life a few years earlier.

Norman Tuttle on the Last Frontier, also set in Alaska, is the story of a teenage boy trying to cope with the sorts of plights we've all faced at one time or another. Annoying younger siblings. Bullies at school. Falling in love for the first time. Getting in huge trouble with your parents for a party you didn't actually mean to happen. And getting mugged in Seattle by a thug named Tango. Told with insight, humor, and a few painful truths, the book is like a buddy movie set some place very, very snowy and cold.

Tom Bodett isn't just a children's book author. He also writes books for adults, and his work has appeared in publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Reader's Digest* and *Harper's Magazine*. He has been a commentator for National Public Radio and is a regular panelist on *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*, NPR's weekly quiz show.

Tom Bodett has lent his vocal talents to *Saturday Night Live*, *National Geographic Explorer*, *Animaniacs*, *Motel Six* commercials, and several documentary films.

Tom Bodett joins us from Dummerston, Vermont. Mr. Bodett, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

TOM BODETT: Well, thank you for having me, Dana.

DR. DANA: You live in Vermont now, but you're most often associated with Alaska, and both of these books are set there. So tell us about Alaska. What were you doing there?

TOM BODETT: Well, I went to Alaska as a young man just looking for adventure. And like so many of us in the '70s, we found it. There's a lot of people around Alaska now who are actually running the place who claim to just have gone there for the summer once 30 years ago. And that seems to be what happens. Even John Muir, the famous naturalist, wrote in his journal that you should never go to Alaska as a young man, because you'll never be satisfied with any other place as long as you live. And there's a lot of truth to that.

DR. DANA: Wow.

TOM BODETT: I've heard it said about New York City that there's nothing you can say about it that isn't true. And the same is true for Alaska. It is immediately captivating. And it sort of brings out the adventure in most people who go there.

DR. DANA: Your first book for young readers, *Williwaw!*, was published in 1999. So why did you decide to write a book for kids?

TOM BODETT: Well, I had one at the time, who was-- he was 11 years old when I started writing *Williwaw!* in 1996. And it struck me one day-- he went out the back door to get in the car to go to school. Just one of those normal mornings. Go get in the car. I'll be right out. And he goes out, and he comes in, and he rolls his eyes, and he goes, 'Dad, there's a moose in the driveway.' And he was just annoyed. He wasn't excited. He was just like, he can't get to the car, because there's a bull moose standing in the driveway. And so we have to go out and shoo the moose away so we can go.

And I realized that here's this perfectly normal kid having a perfectly normal day in a really, really strange place. There's moose in the yards, and there's bears in the woods. And there's all kinds of things going on, like in the summer, the days never end. And we could see five glaciers out our front window. And an active volcano on the horizon. And I thought, wow, he doesn't even understand what a weird place he lives in. And I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to write a story of two really normal kids-- who became Ivan and September Crane-- doing the kinds of things that really normal kids do, and feeling the way that really normal kids do, and have the whole thing set in this very exotic backdrop-- which is not exotic to kids who grew up in Alaska, honestly. Although not all kids in Alaska, certainly not many kids in Alaska live in the bush and in the wilderness lifestyle, such as these characters do. But we all live very close to it.

And these kinds of activities that Ivan and September are up to-- from operating motor boats out on the bay to harvesting clams and all of that-- is just very normal sort of workaday stuff to an Alaska kid. And I thought that might be tremendously interesting to the kids who don't live there and grew up in other places. That they could quite easily sort of project themselves into that scenery, if you will.

DR. DANA: Just as an aside, how exactly do you shoo a moose?

TOM BODETT: Well, it's not always easy, I'll tell you. It depends on how hungry the moose is. If it's in like the late winter and it's been a hard winter, moose can be really stubborn. And some people shoot firecrackers or fireworks at them. I mean, you don't want to hurt them, but

sometimes it takes a really loud noise or bright lights or something. And then sometimes just nothing works. Sometimes you just have to wait for them to go away.

DR. DANA: They're really big, right?

TOM BODETT: No, they're huge. They're huge. It's kind of like suddenly there's an extra car in your driveway.

DR. DANA: So kind of along the lines of what you've been saying about your inspiration for writing the book, taking your son's experience and putting in this exotic setting. September and Ivan don't have the same sort of home life that most kids have. They live in a very rugged and rustic way. But at the same time, they're very much like other kids. I was wondering if you might be willing to read a passage that illustrates how they are both different from and similar to average kids?

TOM BODETT: Yeah. Here's a passage here that has them heading across the bay in their boat after Ivan has fried their radios, and they have to go across the bay against their father's instructions. They've been left alone at the cabin-- their father's a fisherman-- and instructed not to cross the bay. But, here they go.

DR. DANA: The only other thing I need to add is that Tech Patrol, which is mentioned in this passage, is the name of the arcade game that Ivan is totally obsessed with.

TOM BODETT: September held the tiller on the motor with a gloved hand and steered. There was no sign of the other boat, and she figured they must have gone into the neighboring Huckleberry Cove to dig for steamer clams. Fair-weather weekends like this often brought town people out their way, but otherwise the town across the bay stayed an hour boat ride and one entire world away from Steamer Cove.

September thought about the community she lived so close to and felt such distance from. Kids on bikes cruised down the street free as gulls instead of being wired to their father's battery banks. They had moms in cars that drove them places in their perfect clothes that smelled of soap. They didn't bounce around in work-skiffs speckled with fish scales and jam dumpy rubber boots on their feet. Town kids wore expensive athletic shoes and could drink shakes every day as if they were nothing.

No matter how hard she worked at being clean, September knew she would never smell or look like a town kid, and a chocolate shake would always mean something. Her and Ivan's clothes were clean enough but scented with the rich earth smell of pure spring water. Their hair had a little bit of wood smoke in it from the sauna stove, and there was gas on their hands from handling the outboard motor. If town kids think that smells funny, then that's their problem, she thought.

Sure, they had stores in town, and candy, and magazines to ogle. But there was also dust and machinery roaring around pointlessly in the hands of frantic people. They lived in houses packed together in neat little rows like beehive boxes. Certain town kids thought that people who lived

in the forest across the bay and didn't go to real school were some kind of freaks. 'Bush rats,' they called them under their breath. Or right out loud when there were enough of them to feel brave.

September grew angry at the thought, then checked their course to cast it from her mind. The fourteen miles of water to town was enough to put it over the horizon and out of sight. A compass had to be used for the first few miles, and then the town would begin springing up piece by piece. First the radio tower, then the school on the hill, the church steeple, the flag over the harbor, the loading crane at the sawmill, and so on until the whole thing rose before them like some magic garden that grew out of nothing.

That's exactly what it felt like to Ivan -- magic. He peeked over the edge of the skiff, saw they were getting closer, and settled back down with a smile into a loose coil of line. Living in the bush was okay as far as he was concerned -- just okay. He liked fishing and hunting, exploring the woods, getting to know all the animals, cruising in the boat, and all that. But it was all so *ordinary*. Nothing exciting like town where things were happening every way you turned. People watched color televisions in big soft living rooms instead of sitting around in the kitchen with their pathetic radios. There were more kinds of candy than he could remember, and those hot French fries and cold chocolate shakes at the Dockside Traders.

The Dockside. The very thought of it gave Ivan the feeling all was well in the world. No matter that they were crossing the bay against direct parental orders and risking a life of boredom and drudgery on Aunt Nelda's farm in order to repair two radios he shouldn't have been messing with in the first place. Inconvenient details such as these were no match for the charms of the Dockside Traders. There simply was nothing so bad that it couldn't be redeemed by a chocolate shake and a couple of dollars' worth of Tech Patrol.

DR. DANA: Thank you so much.

TOM BODETT: Yeah.

DR. DANA: Did you know kids like September and Ivan when you lived in Alaska?

TOM BODETT: Oh, yeah, yeah, absolutely. There's a lot of families who live the bush lifestyle, if you will. Some of them live way out the road. Or some of them out in the interior of Alaska, live-- they can only get there up the rivers or by dog sled. On the coast, of course, everything is accessible by water. And there's a lot of smaller villages spread around where there's a lot of families that-- fishing families and otherwise-- who live like that. And the kids are home schooled. And they come to town infrequently, and people know them. And they're quite interesting people.

And these kids are incredibly self-sufficient. It's not unusual to see a 10 or 12-year-old handling a skiff out in the bay. And these are kids who grew up that way. I would compare it to like here in Vermont, where I live now, to like kids who grew up on farms. Where you'll see a 60-pound kid leading a 1,200-pound horse around, and moving 16 cows by themselves, and driving four

wheelers and even pickup trucks, and such as that as soon as they're big enough to reach the pedals. So I would put them on the same sort of par as what you'd expect out of a farm kids.

DR. DANA: And yet, at the same time, like the passage illustrates, they're still kids with the same issues and problems like September feeling like her feet are tug boats jammed into these boots. I really like the blend of those two things.

TOM BODETT: Yeah, and you know, you see, of course, any 12-year-old girl is going to feel self-conscious when she gets around other kids. Especially when there's the teasing of other girls and maybe some interesting boys or two on the horizon. It'd make anyone feel self-conscious, especially if you smell like smoke and have big rubber boots on your feet.

DR. DANA: Late in the book, September and Ivan are trapped in the boat in a williwaw, which is a very fierce windstorm. Have you ever experienced intense weather like that in Alaska?

TOM BODETT: Actually, I did experience a williwaw, but after I wrote this book. It was fascinating. I had only heard about them. They're a weather phenomenon, where a weather system gets bottled up behind a coastal mountain range, and it spills over the top, like down through a glacier or between two peaks. And it can be a perfectly calm day on the bay, when all of a sudden, just a single gust of wind will come down one of these glaciers at incredible velocity. And the way I described the storm in Williwaw!, it comes on a little different, where it gets stormier and stormier and then suddenly one of these gusts just comes all at once. And that happens as well.

But my experience was I was heading up to my cabin. And I was out in front of a Gruening Glacier, and it was a perfectly flat, calm day, and I just saw this wind coming across the water. And it's a good thing it was a calm day or I might not have seen that, because if the water was already whipped up, I might not have noticed how quickly it was coming. And I had just enough time to get the boat turned into the wind. And it hit the boat so hard, it almost turned it over backwards. Flipped it right from front to back. And it was not just a little skiff either. It was a 20-foot aluminum boat with a little cabin on it, and it was quite a heavy, heavy boat. And it was all I could do to keep the boat from flipping over backwards just by getting the bow down into the water. And I was trying to beach it.

I turned toward the shore and was trying to just motor it into the shore. And it's the only time-- the whole 10 years I owned that boat-- that I grabbed for my survival suit, which is a special kind of life suit that you use in cold water. And I grabbed my survival suit, figuring I was going to get to the beach and jump off the boat and just be stranded there for who knows how long until somebody came along. And just before I reached the beach, it was over. And it stopped and I turned and headed up to the cabin. And it was the scariest thing I'd ever been in in that boat. And I've been in a few scary things in that boat. So it was really something. It certainly confirmed the drama that I put on it in this book for me.

DR. DANA: Was it hard to write the storm chapters in the book? During those chapters it's really hard to put the book down, because it's such an intense read. Was it intense to write it?

TOM BODETT: It was. I found that very satisfying to do. I've been in a few really scary situations, where you're just really in trouble and barely in control of the situation, and your boat is doing all right, but it's like if one thing goes wrong, you're screwed. And I have been in those situations. They are exceptionally exciting.

DR. DANA: Later.

TOM BODETT: To say the least. And so it wasn't all that difficult to imagine the step-by-step process with this storm kind of starts taking these kids apart. And how they end up in the water at the end of it.

DR. DANA: To switch to another book, Norman Tuttle on the Last Frontier was published five years after Williwaw!, and it is written for a teen audience. Why did you decide to write another book?

TOM BODETT: Well, that one is kind of-- I'll be honest-- it's kind of retooled. I learned a lot about writing when I was writing Williwaw!. I had a very good editor at Knopf Books for Young Readers named Andrea Cascardi, who I'm happy to give the credit to. And she really taught me how to write for kids. And it made me a better writer all the way around. And, essentially, what it boiled down to do is if you have a sentence that isn't moving the story forward, then it shouldn't be there. That kids want the story, especially if you're writing an adventure book. Just write the story. And every sentence should move the story forward in some way.

And being conscious of that was a great improvement on my usual style, which is just to wander all over the place, as you can tell just from this interview. I'm quite happy to digress and then fill in my point of view and everything else along the way. And after I got done with Williwaw! and was thinking about what to do next, I realized-- and it was pointed out to me-- that I had all of these stories of Norman Tuttle, which I had already written for an adult audience as part of a radio program I had done back in the late '80s called The End of the Road.

And I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to take those stories that I'd written with Norman Tuttle and rewrite them with what I've learned about writing for a young audience. And so that's what I did. I added some stories. I wrote some new ones. And it essentially became sort of a serial novel, if you will. And I went through each of the stories that I had already written and rewrote it line-by-line, page-by-page with a different audience in mind. And I think they became such better stories for the effort. And I was quite proud of Norman Tuttle when it was published, even though, like I say, I'd published probably 80% of that had been published previously.

DR. DANA: So Williwaw! was a lot more serious, but Norman Tuttle is very comedic. And is it different to write comedy than it is to write serious?

TOM BODETT: Well, I know how to make adults laugh pretty well. I don't know if kids think I'm that funny.

DR. DANA: You can't ask your kids that question either.

TOM BODETT: Right. 'Dad, that's not funny.' I hear that a lot. But, when I was writing Williwaw!-- Williwaw! was actually the first book I ever wrote. I'd published six books previous to that. But all of those books originated as radio work. Either they were my commentaries from NPR, or they were the monologues out of the radio show I did called The End of the Road, which was where Norman Tuttle was conceived. And for the radio audience, it was an entertainment show. It was a humorous show. And so my whole intent was to entertain. And so obviously humor was a big part of that. And that's what I do anyway.

And when I sat down to write Williwaw!, it was the first time I'd actually sat down just to write a book, where I didn't have a deadline that Saturday, where I had to have this thing scripted and ready to broadcast on Saturday night. And I had the luxury of just going through and writing it. It took me, I think, six months or so to write the first draft of it. And I had an outline. And I just wrote through the outline. And my main focus was to write a really good story. And not be so self-conscious about keeping people laughing along the way. You know what I'm saying?

And I hope I accomplished that. It is a bit of a departure. I think Williwaw! stands apart from anything else I've done as not being primarily humorous. I think it's got some from funny parts in it, but it's not intended to be a funny book.

DR. DANA: Norman Tuttle is such a convincingly written coming of age story that, I'm sorry, I have to ask, is it semi-autobiographical?

TOM BODETT: Oh, yeah. I don't think you can-- yeah, absolutely. I mean, all of my characters are. Every single one of them. And I'm like this-- I'm Sybil is what I am. I've got what they call the Graham Greene syndrome. It's impossible for me to write an unsympathetic character. I've tried. I've actually tried to write bad guys into my stories, and by the end of the story, you always end up liking them, because they all end up being about me, and I just can't hate myself that much.

DR. DANA: Are you planning to write anymore books for kids?

TOM BODETT: Well, I wonder sometimes. I was actually supposed to do a series. Williwaw! was supposed to be a series of books. They started off as four. After I wrote Williwaw!, I looked at the other two story outlines and realized it was only-- I mean my other three story outlines-- and realized it was only two. And so it was going to be a trilogy. And I got about 60 pages into the next installment and realized that the fire wasn't in my belly anymore. That I felt complete with these characters.

And that's what it takes. You have to have curiosity about your own characters. At least I do, so that I can keep discovering things about them. And I felt that I'd gone as far as I could go with Ivan and September and needed to do something else. And that's when I turned and reinvented Norman.

And now I'm mostly raising my own kids and waiting for the next mood to strike me. I do have ideas that come and go. And one of these days one will take root, and I'll write it. I'm in the

fortunate position of not having-- I don't have to write a book right now to pay the bills or anything else. So I can wait for a really good idea. And that's what I'm doing.

DR. DANA: Tom Bodett, thanks so much for coming on the BiblioFiles.

TOM BODETT: Well, thanks for having me, Dana. This was really great.

©2014 the Trustees of Princeton University