



# Authorgraph Jennifer Donnelly

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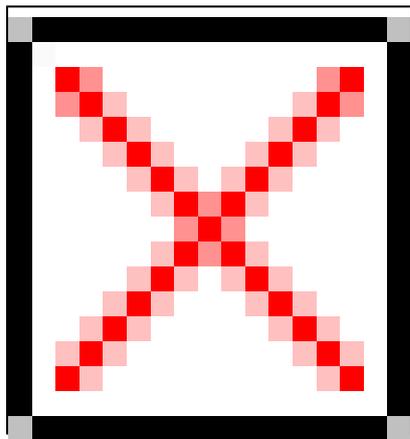
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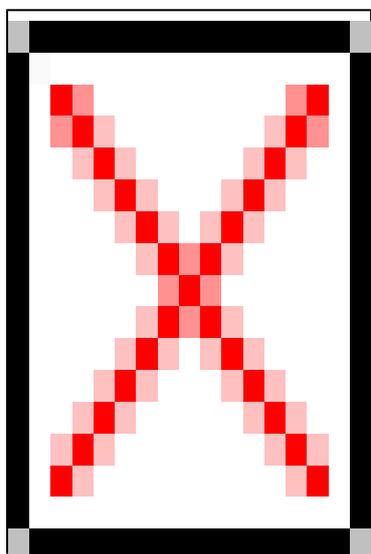
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**Jennifer Donnelly** interviewed by **Joy Court**



Jennifer Donnelly may appear to have sprung fully formed onto the world's stage as an award winning children's author with her debut novel, **A Gathering Light**, winning the 2003 **Carnegie Medal** (and later to be included in the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Top Ten in the public vote for the Carnegie of Carnegies) but, as I learned as we talked over Zoom in the diminishing light of an autumn day, she had served a long apprenticeship as a writer. But she then sold and published three books in two years and her first publication was a picturebook. **Humble Pie**, illustrated by Caldecott winning Stephen Gammell, is a deliciously dark cautionary tale. With a prescient fairy tale feel to this first book, Jennifer acknowledged that she feels she has come full circle with her latest book, **Poisoned**, the second of her deeply dark fractured fairy tales for teens, following the acclaimed **Stepsister**.

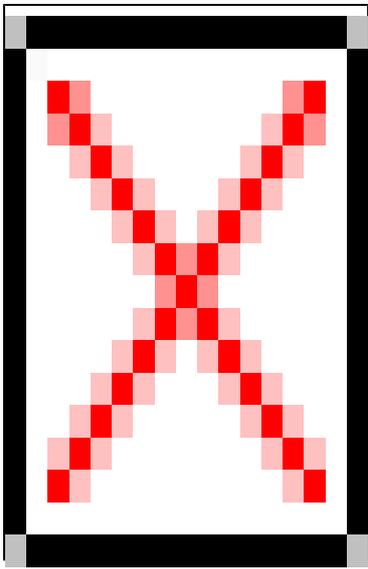


She had wanted to be a writer since she was tiny, fascinated by the shapes of letters and words and wanting to make her

own, but more importantly, she was surrounded by storytellers from her Irish and German relatives. Her bedtime stories, from a mother who survived Nazi Germany, were true stories from her mother's childhood and ignited a lifelong passion for history and an insatiable desire to get her questions answered. It was in London in the early 1980s that she was introduced to the East End, where she found a deep emotional connection with the place and the stories that she wanted to tell. **The Tea Rose** was that first novel she laboured over for twelve long years. Eventually she found an agent who told her that she could write, but that she needed to work, for example on pacing, suspense and narrative drive - this was where she learned the craft of writing. Despite the work, the book was rejected everywhere, and it was in this period that **Humble Pie** was born. **The Tea Rose** was then sold and would be followed by two more adult novels in this series (**The Winter Rose** and **The Wild Rose**) As she said "No one person can guarantee that you will be published, but one person can guarantee that you won't, and that's you." So, "never give up!" is her message to all aspiring writers. The picturebook sale prompted her agent to ask if she had any more ideas and she certainly did! There was another story ready to "burst" out of her. She grew up in and around the Adirondacks and strolling around a bookshop in Old Forge with her mother one day, she was told she must read this, and a copy of **An American Tragedy** by Theodore Dreiser was thrust into her hands. This was a fictionalised account of a famous murder case from the area in which a young man murdered a woman he'd made pregnant - a nineteen-year-old farm girl named Grace Brown. She was also given a non-fiction account of the murder which included excerpts from Grace's letters, which she later tracked down and read in full in the archive at Hamilton College, and it was Grace's desperate, brave voice that sparked again that deep emotional connection. This resulted in **A Gathering Light** and the character of Mattie, created to "give Grace some kindness on her final day?". Mattie is not very different in age to the heroines of her adult novels and I wondered what made her decide to write a YA novel in this case. She said it's "who the story wants to be for" and that it has always seemed to her that she writes for young people to see a "way into the adult world and for adults, a way to escape it?"

It was a New York Times article that provided the emotional spark for her next award-winning novel, **Revolution**. Geneticists had proved a shrivelled relic to be the heart of the 10-year-old Dauphin, son of the ill-fated Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. A "defenceless child" who had been "destroyed" by the revolutionaries. As a new mother, facing up to the unspeakable horrors of the Revolution and the fate of that child was a tough challenge and it proved to be the most difficult of her books to write. It is also the most structurally complex, telling the dual narrative of Andi from present day Brooklyn who has suffered the loss of her younger brother and Alex who lived in 18th Century Paris and witnessed one of the worst crimes of the French Revolution.

Having won critical acclaim and success for historical novels, I wondered what on earth had made Disney select her to write a series of fantasy novels about mermaids and she wondered what had made her agent think that she could do it! Even stranger was the story she told about a visit to an Alexander McQueen retrospective and feeling that creative spark of connection in an ocean inspired display, only to return home that very day to the urgent phone call about the Disney offer. **Deep Blue** was the first of the Waterfire Saga (followed at a rate of one a year or less by **Rogue Wave**, **Dark Tide** and **Sea Spell**) She relished the challenge of world building and creating naturalistic, diverse mermaids from all around the world, very far from "the clam shell-bikini clad stereotypes!" She also loved the opportunity to write for a younger audience, like her then 10-year-old daughter and friends. Disney was also to commission **Lost in a Book** with the slightly different challenge of imagining what happened to Belle, an already well-established character, after the end of *Beauty and The Beast*.



But while all this was going on, her historical ghosts were still trying to break through, she was literally haunted by a vision 'of a man in a coffin'. She began to explore his world, which turned out to be New York of the 1890's and the setting for **These Shallow Graves** with its contrasting stories of women from different strata of society; united by their powerlessness in a patriarchal society. A common thread in all her books is that of her characters 'pushing back' against expectations and forging their own path. She wants young people to 'listen to that small voice inside'. This is particularly true of her female characters and no surprise from someone voted Class Feminist in her High School Yearbook. She acknowledges her debt to the strong women who brought her up, but emphasises that you are not always born strong and for her it is the 'journey' that her characters follow that is key - learning from mistakes and 'getting up after being knocked down'.

**Stepsister** and now **Poisoned** have, of course, been labelled feminist fairy tales, but to me they are about more than just liberating the heroines, they are about liberating the villains - the Ugly Sisters and the Wicked Stepmother. Nobody is born a villain and what makes them that way is what fascinates her. Once again these are fully character-driven novels of psychological depth. Ella reveals her failings and Sophie learns that her loving, emotional heart is her strength. For the author they are also a way of addressing 'the poisoned apple' of the toxicity of social media. 'The tyranny of likes and follows' and asking, 'who is that voice in the mirror?' Who gets to dictate what is beauty and what a girl should be? They beautifully blend her love of history, being set authentically in an alternative 18<sup>th</sup> century France and 17<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and allow her to create the monsters and creatures she so enjoyed in her fantasy novels, while making even more explicit her underlying themes of social justice and kindness. Themes which have a poignant resonance in these COVID times.

When a librarian introduced her 8-year-old self to the original Grimm's fairy tales, she loved their darkness, they 'pulled no punches'. She believes that children 'hunger for the truth', you cannot shield them from the dark side of life, when they can see it all around them. But these tales were also empowering to her because 'fairy tales do show you the monsters, but then how to defeat them'. She is currently in the very early stages of both another fairy tale and another historical story; one that she had not previously felt strong enough to tell. But COVID has taught us all that when you cannot count on tomorrow, you must not waste today and so she is doing it! One will take precedence for completion eventually, but I know that I will relish whatever comes next from this consummate storyteller.

**Joy Court** is Reviews Editor for **The School Librarian** and Past Chair of the **CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**.

Books mentioned

**Humble Pie**, Athenaeum, 978-0689844355 (O/P)

**A Gathering Light**, Bloomsbury, 978-0747570639, £7.99

**Revolution**, Bloomsbury, 978-1408801512

**Deep Blue**, Hodder, 978-1444921205, £6.99

**Rogue Wave**, Hodder, 978-1444925661, £6.99

**Dark Tide**, Hodder, 978-1444928334, £6.99

**Sea Spell**, Disney Hyperion, 978-1484713037, £7.99

**These Shallow Graves**, Hot Key, 978-1471405174,£7.99

**Lost in a Book**, Disney Press, 978-1368057684, £6.99

**Step Sister**, Hot Key, 978-1471407970 £7.99

**Poisoned**, Hot Key, 978-1471408144, £7.99

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