



'WINDOWS' AND 'MIRRORS': AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR, *BEVERLY BRENNA*

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doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.1-4



Beverley Brenna

ABSTRACT

Beverley Brenna is one of the well-known Canadian authors. She has written *Wild Orchid series*, *The Moon Children* and, has published few poems. She is a special educator and an author at the same time. In the interview, she tells about the first book/incident which inspired her literary career, and, the amount of research she does before writing a novel and so on. The author has answered questions like: What inspired her to write about disability? What is the relationship between existentialism and disability? What is her advice to other writers who do not include disability in their writing? The interview sums up an author's perspective on the subject of disability in society.

Introduction

Beverley Brenna is one of the contemporary Canadian writers. She lives in Saskatoon, Canada. She has tutored the students of elementary school. She has also been a coordinator of gifted programs. Further, Brenna is working as a reading specialist as well as special education teacher. She has completed her Ph.D research in 'Elementary Education: Language and Literary Occurred' at the University of Alberta. She has been writing poetry from the age of seven. Brenna has written 10 novels, 2 picture books, 1 short stories, 1 collection of poetry for children. She has also written a book for Special Educators. Her notable works are *Wild Orchid* (2005) series which had been shortlisted for Young Adult Book Award from the Canadian Library Association., a Manitoba Reader's Choice Award and Saskatchewan's Silver Birch Award.

Abbreviations:

JB: J BANUMATHI; **BB:** BEVERLEY BRENNA

Interview

JB: What inspired you to write about Disability?

BB: As a classroom teacher and a special education teacher, I realized I was working with students who rarely saw themselves in books. I had been writing a draft of the young adult novel that would become *Wild Orchid*, and as I re-read it I realized the main character was extremely boring, much like me at that age. As I worked with her character to create someone more original and interesting, I realized she was showing traits of autism and suddenly I knew that my task would be to represent her as a young woman on the autism spectrum (selecting a diagnosis that was available at that time, Asperger's Syndrome; now, the diagnostic manual doesn't recognize Asperger's as a distinct diagnosis, preferring to use "autism" for everyone on that spectrum). This corresponded with my decision to do a PhD focusing on literature presenting characters with disability, and became an interesting journey forward in both my creative writing and my academic research.

JB: What is the first book/incident that inspired you to write a book of your own?

BB: I began writing as an adult poet, and published a number of single poems in various magazines and anthologies. My mother also wrote poetry, and seeing her work at home inspired me. After taking a children's literature class as part of my teaching degree, I began to recognize the tremendous artistry in the best children's books and started to think about writing books for that age group.

But I did write fiction as a child, and I have a manuscript (unpublished, of course!) of about 50 pages that I wrote when I was in grade five. It's a mystery, and recorded completely in red pen.

JB: Is there any real life model after whom you have characterized Natasha in the novel *The Moon Children*?

BB. When I wrote this novel, I was a special education consultant in a public school system. I hadn't worked directly before with children who were nonverbal, and part of my collaborative planning took place with teachers supporting kids with various language challenges in regular classrooms. A few of these students had been diagnosed with selective mutism, and I was intrigued at the onset of their speech differences as well as their trajectories (sometimes back into speech, sometimes not). Creating the character of Natasha (who is completely fictional) turned out to be a great learning opportunity for me as it made me seek out further information about speech disorders. It was also a challenge as a writer, because I discovered very quickly that creating scenes with someone who doesn't speak is quite hard! But once I'd begun working with both Natasha and Billy, I had to keep going. That particular book took me about ten years to complete, and it had many iterations beginning as a novel from the first-person, in Billy's own voice, to the third-person perspective it now has.

JB: What do you think the relationship between Disability and Existentialism? (Inspired from Jane Taylor's character)

BB: I have a background in theatre and in my early years of training for the stage I became very interested in Existentialist writing and Theatre of the Absurd, particularly plays by Harold Pinter. As I learned more about autism, throughout my teaching career, I saw parallels between Pinter's dialogue and the flat tone, many pauses to account for slower processing speed, and "mindblindness" demonstrated by some people on the autism spectrum. This seemed to be quite a new connection I hadn't seen before, and I have a published book chapter related to how we might interpret one of Harold Pinter's characters (Stanley, from "The Birthday Party") as someone with autism. Again, a new idea, and nothing I'd seen in any other academic writing on this play.

Brenna B. (2016). Asperger's Syndrome as a Framework for the Characterization of Stanley in Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party." In A. B. Saebo (Ed.), *International Network for Research in Arts Education (INRAE) Yearbook, Volume 4*, University of Stavanger, Norway: Waxmann Press.

JB: What do you think are the required changes in the education system, which will help persons with disability to cope up with ableism?

BB: I think that all children need early models of people with disabilities/exceptionalities so that these types of differences become “normal” in terms of the human experience. We can support this by ensuring that libraries and classrooms present many, varied characters, with all sorts of differences among them. Books should be “windows and mirrors” to the children who read them, helping us learn about topics new to us, as well as reflecting our own struggles and achievements. So...in this way we engage students with the idea that ability is a continuum, and very contextualized depending on the type of task we’re doing, rather than something we either “have” or “have not.” By doing this, rather than asking people with disabilities to cope or be resilient to ableism, I think we can prevent ableism from happening at all.

JB: As an author what would you advice for other authors who do not include any element of Disability in their writing?

BB: I suggest that as writers, we try our best to create authentic worlds for our readers, whatever genre we are working with, and that we examine our own world for the kinds of differences among people that we might attempt to represent. If a particular characterization is not part of our own direct experience, then as writers we owe it to our readers to do our research properly, consulting with “experts” and making sure we are representing that character accurately. In this way, the process of writing allows writers, as well as readers, to make the most of a learning opportunity.

JB: What kind of research you do and how long you do the research before beginning a novel?

BB: I use varied sources to try and “get a character right”—from published books, to online information, to connecting with experts in the field and/or people who present with particular differences themselves. For the Wild Orchid series, for example, I was most fortunate in attending a lecture by Tony Attwood, an Australian specialist on Asperger’s Syndrome, and I had the chance to ask him a few questions after his presentation. One of the key things Attwood’s work helped me think about is how diagnoses such as autism have positive aspects as well as negative—and how all people have gifts to share along with whatever challenges we might have. His website, which I read from later as I was working along on my manuscript, is so very positive about the characteristics of autism that are helpful and wonderful, such as excellent visual memory.

I tend to begin a project and “write my way into it” before getting down to details and accuracy about anything. For me, creating an interesting character, and trying to see the world myself through that character’s eyes, is an integral part of my process. Once I have completed a first draft (usually quite bad writing) I start to go back and revise for quality. I seem unable to pre-plan my work, and I never come up with an outline before I begin.

JB. What is the role of literature in creating a better society for the persons with Disability?

BB: I believe that literature is an artifact of the culture we live in, using the idea of culture very widely to think about ethnicity but also ability, socio-economic status, religion, language, sexual orientation and gender. Just as literature represents who we are as people, it also has the opportunity to shape who we are as people—for better or worse.

The value of literature in helping us understand ourselves and others, and think about ways we want to be in the world (and ways we don’t want to be in the world—the value of looking at villains and separating ourselves from them as best we can), is, I think, monumental. I do believe that authors have the potential to serve social justice in many, diverse ways, and that we owe it to our readers to do the very best job we can. Part of this burden is making sure we have created our best work, and most of us cannot do that by ourselves—we need the feedback of readers, we need good practices, such as research, to enrich our

repertoires of ideas, and we need good editors as it's very difficult to see flaws and new avenues in work we alone have created.

About the Interviewee: Banumathi. J (j.banumathi11.5@gmail.com) pursuing Ph.D., research in Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, India. I have written a book on the Body Theory with special reference to Anosh Irani which is to be shortly published. My current research is disability reading of few selected literary texts. The purpose of the interview is to know more about the author who has written quiet a lot on disability. It aims to get acquainted with the author's perspective towards disability in the society. Her works sums up, how disability should be seen under a positive light.
