



Jacqueline Wilson: happy 100th book

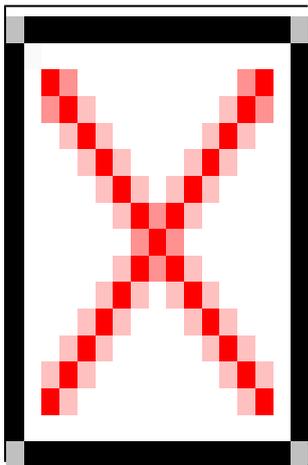
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[209](#) [2]

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Julia Eccleshare appraises **Jacqueline Wilson**



Dame Jacqueline Wilson is not just one of our most prolific and best-selling children's authors. Her commitment to her craft and her readers has led her to being one of most honoured and best-loved of contemporary British writers. Her books treat serious social and personal issues in a way that is accessible and enjoyable for her readers, offering them reassurance and a way of exploring their feelings. Her memorable female protagonists, like Tracy Beaker or Hetty Feather, sometimes sad or angry, survive and thrive through their energy, resourcefulness, imagination and capacity for friendship. On the publication of *Opal Plumstead*, her 100th book no less, **BfK** invited **Julia Eccleshare** to assess Jacqueline Wilson's contribution to children's literature.

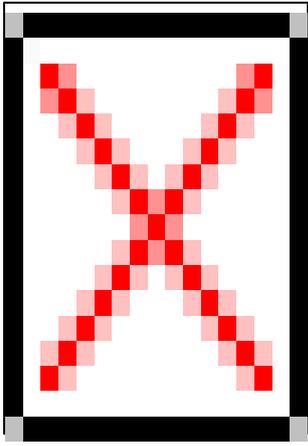
Last month, Jacqueline Wilson took on a new role. Dressed as ever in her trademark super-stylish black, she had an added touch ? on top she wore a glorious short gown stitched with gold, banded in red and emblazoned with crests. More unusual was her head-gear ? a mortar board with a fetching gold tassel dangling off its front edge. But although she was dressed differently to usual, Jacky, as she is known everywhere, remained absolutely herself as she skipped up to the platform at the University of Roehampton to be enrolled as its new Chancellor.

Dame Jacqueline Wilson has a long history of involvement with the University of Roehampton, which she describes as her ?local?, and not just as a figurehead although she had already held the roles of Professorial Fellow and Pro Chancellor. During the ceremony, her active involvement in teaching was reflected with some students reading their own stories which had come out of creative writing classes while others performed wonderful, original dance inspired by Tracy Beaker among other characters from Jacky's books.

The carefully scripted inauguration went delightfully off-track with the addition of a surprise musical performance of a special song for Jacky ? or JWubbs as they named her ? by Luke Potter and Alex Hearne, both of whom are starring in **Hetty Feather** at the Vaudeville Theatre. Not many children's authors have featured in song and it is just another example of Jacky's far-reaching cultural influence and the incredible respect and affection in which she is held.

Now well into her sixties, and having been at the top either in terms of writing output or performance for the past twenty years or so, Jacky shows no signs of slowing down or stepping away from the things she loves.

The books are still coming on a regular basis: only a couple of weeks before the inauguration, Jacky had enchanted



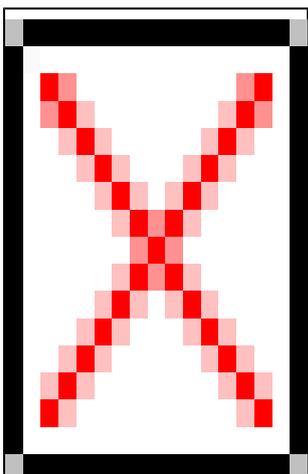
100 friends and colleagues at a wonderful party at the Ritz to celebrate the publication of her latest book, **Opal Plumstead**.

And Jacky is as much in her element as ever among her still passionate fans. In the spring, I chaired an event with Jacky at the completely packed Queen Elizabeth Hall as part of the Imagine Festival. Jacky was in new territory talking about **Paws and Whiskers**, an anthology of stories about animals written by a host of brilliant contemporary writers which she edited. It's a book which reflects her passionate commitment to the plight of abandoned pets and, in particular, those who are cared for by the Battersea Dogs Home. Jacky looked tiny as she sat in a big armchair in the spacious venue. But she spoke without a note or prompt for an hour and the audience was utterly spellbound. At the end of the session, Jacky skipped along the stage pausing to be photographed with different adoring fans. As she passed me she whispered. 'Now I know what Marilyn Monroe felt like. It's what keeps me young!'

It is 45 years since the publication of her first book and, perhaps more meaningfully, it is 24 years since the publication of **The Story of Tracy Beaker**, which is always seen as her 'breakthrough book' partly on account of it marking the beginning of her partnership with illustrator Nick Sharratt.

24 years is a long, long time to hold such a pre-eminent position in the field. In those years Jacky has generally written two books a year (her overall total is 100 books); she has scooped up most prizes; she has seen her sales top 35 million copies worldwide; she has enthralled literally thousands of children at festivals and in schools; she has been the Children's Laureate, during which time she espoused the cause of reading aloud saying 'It's the easiest way of making sure your child is hooked on books for life,' and promoted it with **Great Books to Read Aloud**, a book of recommended titles for sharing with children of all ages. She was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2008 for her services to children's literature and she has been the subject of several TV and radio shows including 'With Great Pleasure', the subject of **The South Bank Show** on TV.

Despite changing fashions in publishing 'the rise and rise of dystopian fiction, the headlong success of celebrity authors, the seemingly unending thirst for diaries' Jacky's stories have continued to make readers. Girls 'she has boy fans but not so many' still relish her ability to tune into their lives without any sense of patronising. 'She seems to know just how I feel,' is a typical reader response.



Jacky always has known how her readers feel and she has always been bold enough to delve in

the lives of children who had previously rarely been represented in fiction. It was a boldness which, with the benefit of hindsight, now looks more like prescience. **The Illustrated Mum**, the story of Dol and Star struggling to manage the difficulties of coping with a manic depressive mum, is a particularly telling example. When it was published in 1999 neither the number of children caring for adults nor mental health issues were much discussed. Many adults thought Jacky had gone too far and that the subject matter was unlikely and merely issue-driven. Now, I think they would read the book very differently. But even when she was writing about children adapting to 'blended' families, as they are now rather blandly called, many adults were discomfited by some of the stark realities she presented even though the high number of children in such families is well documented. They also failed to notice the many other things Jacky includes in her stories - one of the most enjoyable is the commentary she weaves in about the life of a writer. In an obvious self-portrait in **Clean Break** she introduces Jenna Williams who has cheekily taken the same initials

But one of the biggest changes in the perception of Jacky over the years is the way in which adults now regard her. For a long time, Jacqueline Wilson books were very much children's choices. Now parents 'get it' too. They see the power of Jacky's storytelling; they are less frightened by the dangers implicit in her fractured or dysfunctional families. They will never be as passionate as their children are about her books - and rightly so as they are not the prime audience and their perceptions of the world don't need to be guided in the same way - but, through Jacky's considerable media exposure and the success of exhibitions of her work, such as the one that was initially at **Seven Stories**, Newcastle and later at the **Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood**, her position at the centre of contemporary writing for children has been firmly assured.

And over the years and without diminishing her child-centred view of the world, Jacky has adapted what she writes, too. Her very special relationship with **The Foundling Museum** in Coram Fields - she was appointed a Coram Fellow in 2008 - has been very beneficial to Jacky. Hetty Feather, a loveable Victorian orphan who rails against the hospital regime and searches desperately for her real mother, is an excellent character. Jacky writes her history lightly. There is no lurking card index; instead the Victorian background is sketchy, but enough is given to create a whole set of problems for Hetty and her fellow orphans, which are obviously different from contemporary fiction. The two titles that followed developed Jacky's Victorian world and also provided an obvious stepping stone to Jacky's most recent book, **Opal Plumstead**, with its suffragette theme.

Listing Jacky's range of subject matter or the quality of her characters or the empathy and humour she shows can never fully explain why she has retained her pre-eminence for so long.

No reason will ever be *the* one but maybe this is the most likely: at a time when the Holy Grail for many publishers and children's authors is the 'cross-over' novel, Jacky has kept her eye on exactly the same horizon. She still writes directly for young readers, telling them stories about characters they are fascinated by whether they identify directly with them or merely observe them. She never patronises them and she never sells them short.

That's no mean feat as you become so adored. No wonder her fans live on.

Julia Eccleshare is a writer, broadcaster and lecturer, and the Guardian's children's books editor. She is a judge of the Branford Boase first novel prize and was made an M.B.E. in the Queen's Honours list in June 2014 for services to Children's Literature.

Opal Plumstead, Doubleday Children's Books, 978-0857531094, £12.99 hbk

Paws and Whiskers, Doubleday Children's Books, 978-0857533531, £6.99 pbk

The Story of Tracy Beaker, Yearling, 978-0440867579, £6.99 pbk

The Illustrated Mum, Yearling, 978-0440867814, £6.99 pbk

Clean Break, Yearling, 978-0440868507, £6.99 pbk

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