



Partnership for Children
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Registered Charity Number 1089810



MISSION

To help children and young people, throughout the world, develop skills which will enhance their present and future emotional wellbeing.

Stories for 20 million children

Jacqueline Wilson is one of the world's most successful children's authors. Her books have sold more than 20 million copies and been translated into 30 languages. She writes about the difficult issues that confront children, and draws a huge response from her readers. Many children write back, discussing the book they have just read and telling her about their own problems. Hers is a mailbag that quickly dispels the picture of childhood as a time of innocence and unalloyed happiness.

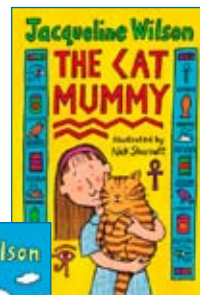
'A lot of children are worried about being teased or bullied,' says Jacqueline. 'A lot of children are sad about their pets dying. A lot of children are worried because their best friend has gone off with someone else. Or they say "my mum and dad have split up, and I don't like mum's new boyfriend." Many worry about the transition to secondary school.'

Perhaps children tell her about their problems because she often writes about children who have had a raw deal. *Bad Girls*, for instance, deals with the effects of bullying.

'Bullying seems to be happening more and more now, and it is quite terrifying physically. Bullies are beating kids up and doing the most appalling things. I try to show that there are children who are bullies, and then try to let children work out why. Children do have an immense sense of what is fair, and most of them want to be good and want things to be fair, even if they don't always manage to behave in that way.'

She has tackled the tricky issue of death in two books - *The Cat Mummy* for younger children, and *Vicky Angel*.

'In Victorian times, of course, every single children's book had a death or a death scene, but it seems to have become something we are uncomfortable about. It's difficult from a writer's point of view, because everyone has a different view of death, with matters of



religion, background, culture. So it helps that I write from one child's perspective. I'm not saying that this is what happens when we die, I'm just showing how one character feels about it. It's helpful to children because it's very difficult if you cannot talk about it.'

Jacqueline's willingness to write about difficult issues and difficult children has drawn criticism. Some parents, for instance, have complained that Tracy Beaker, heroine of a series of books, is a bad role model. But Jacqueline trusts her readers.

'Tracy Beaker is appallingly badly behaved, but that is because she has had a very rough start in life,' she says. 'When I go to schools and ask children why they like her, they say "because she's naughty." Then when I ask why she's naughty, they say "because she's sad." I ask why she is sad, and the children say "because she wants to see her mum," or "she doesn't have any friends." I am thrilled to bits that they can see the reasons why Tracy is as she is.'

Jacqueline is quick to agree that the books she writes today are very different to the books she read as a girl.

'These are books I would like to have read,' she says. 'I was an avid reader of children's books, but from eight or nine I preferred to read adult books about children because they presented childhood in a more realistic way. In the Fifties, children's literature was bland. Everybody knew their place, and Mum and Dad always knew best.'

But isn't there a danger that writing about difficult and painful issues presents children with a rather bleak view of life?

'Yes, that's right. For instance, there is a moment for most children when they suddenly realise that at some stage mum and dad are going to die. As adults we manage to blot it out and pretend it doesn't happen, but children can become quite obsessed about it for a time. So I'm generally in favour of giving a happy ending, but when you're dealing with these sorts of situations you have to be truthful. I wrote a book called *The Suitcase Kid*, which dealt with separation. Many kids feel "if only I can do the right thing, mum and dad will come back together again." I deliberately didn't have the mum and dad getting back together again, because that's not what usually happens, but gradually the main character begins to come to terms with it and to make new friends.'

Jacqueline sees an obvious link between her own work and Zippy's Friends, the programme run by Partnership for Children which helps young children to develop coping and social skills.

'It's lovely that there is a whole programme trying to address children's emotional health,' she says. 'We are now addressing children's physical health, and realising that it is a good thing if they can eat healthy food and have more exercise, and it seems bizarre that we're not also addressing their emotional health and helping our children to be happy human beings. Lots of parents want their children to be rich or famous, but these things are not 'it' at all. 'It' is being a kind and happy human being who gets on well with other human beings.'

'If there is any kind of theme to my books, it's 'don't pick on people because they are the odd one out.' It's about valuing people. I think sometimes when children are nasty to a child who is different they haven't really thought it through, haven't considered that the other child is actually another person, just the same as them. If you show them what it is like to be in a wheelchair or to have a speech defect, they look at other children differently.'

Jacqueline thinks that in some ways life is harder for children growing up today than it was when she was a girl, or even when she was bringing up her own daughter, Emma.

'The pressure on children to be cool is very difficult,' she says. 'Little girls are expected to stop playing with dolls by the time they are six, which I think is awful. Ten and eleven year olds are desperate to have high heels and to wear clothes that would look more suitable in a nightclub. It's a huge dilemma for parents who don't have much

money or who have different values. Children are under so much commercial pressure.'

She worries too that in many countries fears for their safety mean that children are not allowed to go off with friends and play in the park, and are instead kept indoors or under adult supervision. Adults, she thinks, sometimes organise children too much.

'Children now have gym one day, Brownies the next, so many different things. They're all lovely activities, but sometimes I think we over-stimulate children, instead of letting them create their own games or just lie on their backs on the grass, chewing a bit of grass and gazing at the sky.'

'I worry about reliance on the Internet. Downloading some information is not the same as thinking about it and looking it up in a book or two. All books have had editors, whereas you don't always get that on the Internet. I find it sad when 30 children all hand me their projects on Jacqueline Wilson and, apart from how they've laid it out and maybe someone has downloaded a different picture, they're really all the same. What's the point of that?'

Yet one thing she can see from her own sales figures is that, despite competing attractions, children still love to read. The appeal of a good book is timeless and international.

'In Japan, for instance, I'm quite popular, even though the culture and way of education are very different. Children seem to identify with the characters - it's very strange. In Australia and New Zealand, the children's way of life is very different, and, when I read to them, after three minutes they're all laughing at my English accent, and yet they always laugh at exactly the same point in the story as English children, always sit up straight at the same tense part.'

As much as children love to read, so Jacqueline loves to write. She has written 'about 90' books, still produces two a year and has no intention of stopping. The bestsellers will keep coming, and so will the letters from her legion of young readers.

• Partnership for Children is currently working with Jacqueline Wilson and Booktrust on a brochure for parents and teachers, recommending storybooks that can help young children to deal with tough times.



- **Contact us if you would like more information**
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