

BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER: FEBRUARY 2005

EDITOR'S NOTE

Hello! I'm delighted to include an interview with one of my favorite children's authors...Esme Raji Codell.

Please note that I have just posted new book recommendations at the Lutra Press website at <http://www.lutrapress.com/idea/>. These suggestions are come from requests I received at workshops this month – including the Oregon Reading Association annual meeting.

INTERVIEW WITH ESME RAJI CODELL

Introduction:

If you haven't heard of Esme Raji Codell, prepare to be dazzled! Esme first charmed readers across the nation with her best-seller, *Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*, a funny, honest and poignant account of her teaching experiences. She followed it with *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading: For Ravenous and Reluctant Readers Alike*, which is required reading for anyone seeking to bring the magic of reading to children!

Her next book, *Sing a Song of Tuna Fish: Hard-to-Swallow Stories from Fifth Grade*, is a memoir suited for children to read – an unusual genre. Along the way, Esme built and maintains a website that is a powerhouse of resources for parents and teachers, at www.planetesme.com and she opened a book salon in her hometown of Chicago that welcomes teachers, authors and parents. If you have a chance to visit Chicago, be sure to check in on what's happening at Esme's book salon.

Esme's latest book, *Sahara Special*, won the coveted International Reading Association Award for Intermediate Fiction.

Cheryl: Hello Esme, and welcome to the *Books to Grow With* newsletter. I'd like to start by focusing on your most recent book, *Sahara Special*, which I look forward to recommending in my sequel to *Books to Grow With*! Tell us about the plot...

Esme: *Sahara Special* is about a little girl who is receiving special education services in the public school she attends, and is being held back in the fifth grade. She feels stigmatized by her past performance at school, and falls into a pattern of hiding her true talent as a writer, since she is afraid anything she does at school will be used against her. Luckily, with the help of some wild classmates and an outspoken teacher, she is able to find the encouragement she needs to share the part of herself that is truly special.

Cheryl: How do you come up with such realistic dialogue? I felt as though I knew Sahara when I was reading the book...

Esme: I love listening to the way people talk. Growing up, I used to copy down conversations I overheard in my diaries, just to try to recreate them, and to try to capture all the different ways people speak. I spent years working with classrooms in the Chicago Public Schools, and I used the wonderful colorful language I heard during that period to create the dialogue in *Sahara Special*.

Cheryl: Along with being a great story, *Sahara Special* also gives us a window into issues that many kids experience, such as divorce, learning problems, and being different.

What, if any, do you see as the role of a book in inspiring and empowering kids?

Esme: Well, that's a good question, and it has a sort of a two-part answer, I think. In the big picture, whatever a child's socioeconomic background may be, if they have the ability and

opportunity to read great children's books, that is their chance to have the same thing as a child is a wealthy, privileged school. During a time where socioeconomic class is a means for a new kind of segregation, children's books remain a great equalizer, and a great source of empowerment. For all children, books help us feel like we're less alone, like we're not the only ones facing problems or thinking in unusual directions, and this can be very empowering as well. I always say that a child who discovers the joys of reading will never be as bored or lonely as a child who does not.

As far as inspiring kids...well, when I was writing this book, Sahara had to face a lot of problems. As I was writing, I would think, "oh, no, Sahara is failing school!" or "oh, no, her counselor has confiscated her letters and is using them against her!" or "oh, no, Sahara needs more friends!" I was very upset at myself, as the author, for putting so many obstacles in my main character's way. But I knew that I had to believe in that character, to have faith that she could overcome these challenges, because I knew if I could have Sahara accomplish this in an authentic way, readers might believe they could as well. So if readers find themselves rooting for Sahara, I hope they know that I was, too! And I sure do hope that kids who see Sahara succeeding will see a bit of themselves in that success.

Books offer us the chance to know more people outside of our own little spheres, both through characters and the spirits of the authors. In this way, we have more mentors, more friends, more chances to find people we like, or don't like so well...in this way, I think books and reading certainly help us grow, whatever age we are.

Cheryl: Are there topics you think deserve a good children's book that you hope to write?

Esme: Hmm! I don't work that way...I don't start with a premise, I start with a person. I think all writing is about exploring the potential of a character, and in this way, all good children's literature is character education literature, and can definitely inspire the kind of people we choose to become. I think any topic can get a good treatment if you care about it enough, but I never talk about a book before I write it. It's like Sahara's teacher, Miss Pointy, says: "if it comes out of your mouth, it won't come out of your pen!"

Cheryl: Who were your favorite children's authors, when you were young?

Esme: When I was young, I read a lot of Little Lulu comic books (I do like dialogue and humor!), the *Frances* series of books by Russell and Lillian Hoban, which featured a little badger girl in realistic situations, and I was also a big fan of Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* and *Henry Huggins* books. I think Cleary was a master at giving the daily life of children the gravity it deserves. Things that may not be important to us as grown-ups are given great importance in her stories. I still read *Ramona the Pest* once a year to remind myself what a really great children's book feels like.

Cheryl: Your books provide such rich diversity of issues and of genres. Do teachers use them to work with children? Do you provide materials for teachers to assist them?

Esme: Thank you, Cheryl. Teachers do use them; as far as *Sahara Special* goes, a number of them have written to me to let me know that they can see their own classroom in Sahara's classroom, and that's a tremendous compliment. If I can portray an urban classroom in a way that is authentic, I am very gratified...I know I was looking for that when I was a young reader. Teachers also love to use my memoir about growing up in Chicago, *Sing a Song of Tuna Fish*, to show kids that they don't just have to write about dinosaurs and robots and haunted houses, their own real lives are good enough to write about! Each chapter starts with a writing prompt, "let me tell you about my neighborhood," "let me tell you about school," that allows young readers to springboard into their own thoughts and memories. Discussion guides are

available through my website, www.planetesme.com, or through my publisher, www.hyperionbooksforchildren.com.

But I have to say, Cheryl, I think my most helpful book is *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading*, which I created to help teachers and parents and anyone who cares about children feel more confident about their ability to be a supporting character in a child's reading life story. Anyone who picks up this book can become an expert in children's literature, and can create beautiful bridges between school and home through literacy. I run a storefront children's literary salon in Chicago where I dedicate myself to the principles found in that book and where everyone can celebrate the joys of children's literature.

Cheryl: Esme, you have so many different projects! Can you share a bit about your upcoming book, *Diary of a Fairy Godmother*?

Esme: When I was a little girl, I did not care for Cinderella...I couldn't identify with her passivity. I wanted to be the fairy godmother, I wanted to be the one who could make wishes come true! I figured I wasn't the only one who wanted a wand. That was the seed for this book, and it grew into a story that I hope will inspire young wand-wielders everywhere! It's about a little witch girl who drops out of charm school to become a fairy godmother, and I think it's a fun book for children in that 9-12 age who still have one foot in the world of fairy tales and the other foot in the world of grown-up expectations.

Cheryl: Esme, thank you so much for the opportunity to talk with you!

Esme: My pleasure, and thank you!

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE BOOKS ESME MENTIONED

Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year by Esme Raji Codell. Algonquin, 2001. 216 pages. Esme's true story, filled with humor and poignant moments, of her first year as a teacher.

How to Get Your Child to Love Reading: For Ravenous and Reluctant Readers Alike by Esme Raji Codell. Algonquin, 2003. 480 pages filled with ideas, projects, and activities designed to bring the magic of reading to every child. Includes extensive list of recommended books.

Sing a Song of Tuna Fish: Hard-to-Swallow Stories from Fifth Grade by Esme Raji Codell. Hyperion, 2004. 144 pages. A delightful and unusual "child's memoir" that portrays the adventures and feelings of a fifth-grader, which just happen to be Esme's own experiences.

Sahara Special by Esme Raji Codell. Hyperion, 2003. 192 pages. Described in Esme's interview.

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