



Kate DiCamillo

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Pennsylvania

COUNTRY OF
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**United
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Minneapolis

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Minnesota

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**United
States of
America**

How I Became a Writer and Discovered Winn-Dixie

When I was 5 years old, I moved with my mother and brother from Philadelphia to a small town in Florida. People talked more slowly there and said words I had

never heard before, like “ain't” and “y'all” and “ma'am.” Everybody knew everybody else. Even if they didn't, they acted like they did. It was all so different from what I had known before, and I fell swiftly and madly in love.

I also grew up with a dog I loved — a black standard poodle named Nanette. I spent a lot of time dressing Nanette up — in a green ballet tutu and then later like a disco dancer. She was a wonderful, very accommodating dog.

I was a very sickly kid, and suffered from chronic pneumonia, which is why we moved to the warm southern climate. I think being ill contributed to my development as a writer. I learned early on to entertain myself by reading. I learned to rely on stories as a way of understanding the world. I read everything I could, and some of my favorites were *The Twenty-One Balloons*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Yearling*, *Ribsy*, and a book called *Somebody Else's Shoes*.

Writing my own stories had always been one of my dreams, but I didn't start until I was 29. I was working in a book warehouse and was assigned to the third floor where all the children's books were. For four and a half years, I spent all day, every day around children's books and it wasn't long before I fell in love with them.

I also discovered how much time and work goes into creating stories. In college, teachers often complimented me on my writing, and I made the mistake of believing I had a talent for it. I finally realized that talent really doesn't have anything to do with it, but working does. So five days a week, I get up, drink a cup of coffee, and then go to the

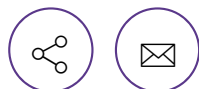
computer and write. Two pages a day are what I ask of myself. I never want to write, but I'm always glad that I have done it. It takes me about a year to finish a book.

I wrote *Because of Winn-Dixie* because I was homesick for Florida (I live in Minneapolis) and because I wanted a dog and couldn't have one (I lived in an apartment building that didn't permit them). It allowed me to go home and to spend time with a dog of the highest order. As for the other characters, I never know where they come from; I just feel happy and lucky when they choose me to tell their stories. India Opal Buloni seems so real to me, I don't think I could have made her up. Rather, I feel like I discovered her.

The most rewarding part of being a writer is when people tell me my stories have meant something to them. Also, I've gotten letters from kids who say they didn't like to read until they read *Because of Winn-Dixie*, and now they like books. That's an amazing thing. It makes me feel like the small stories I tell matter.

If you want to be a writer, write a little bit every day. Pay attention to the world around you. Stories are hiding, waiting everywhere. You just have to open your eyes and your heart.

Kate DiCamillo won a Newbery Medal in 2004 for *The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread*.



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