

## Ellen Raskin and *The Westing Game*

by Sarah Collinge

Ellen Raskin was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on March 13, 1928. A year later, the United States fell into a depression that placed millions of Americans out of work. Her early life was a life of poverty, yet her childhood memories became the subject of many of her novels.

As an adult, Raskin began a career in art. She illustrated books and designed over 1,000 book covers. She had a passion for her work, and other people admired her for her energy and determination.

At the age of 38, Raskin published her first picture book, which she both wrote and illustrated. In 1971, she published her first novel, *The Mysterious Disappearance of Leon (I Mean Noel)*. In 1974, she published *Figgs and Phantoms*, which received the Newbery Honor. Raskin continued to write puzzle-mysteries, and was finally awarded the Newbery Medal for her book *The Westing Game*, which was published in 1978.

Raskin died at the young age of 56, on August 8, 1984.

Ellen Raskin kept working notes for her book *The Westing Game*, which can now be viewed at [www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/authors/raskin/notes.htm](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/authors/raskin/notes.htm). Her notes tell about her inspiration for *The Westing Game*.

When Raskin began writing *The Westing Game*, the United States was preparing for its grandest celebration—the American Bicentennial. More than 25 million Americans helped to get the country ready by restoring historic buildings and planning historic festivals. On July 4, 1976, people enjoyed concerts, parades, and historical reenactments, and watched extravagant fireworks displays.

Throughout these preparations and celebrations, citizens were thinking about what it means to be an American. Many reflected on their lives and embraced the idea of a brighter tomorrow.

The Bicentennial brought to mind a dream of upward mobility and the opportunity to begin again. The term “the American Dream” was first coined in James Truslow Adams’s book *The Epic of America*, in which Adams describes the dream as one of “a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank.”

Raskin used symbolism throughout the novel *The Westing Game* to communicate her own feelings about patriotism and the American Dream. In the puzzle-mystery, there is more than one mystery to solve: Who killed Sam Westing? AND is the American Dream still alive?

Resources:

Adams, J. T. (1931). *The epic of America*. Boston, MA: Little Brown and Co.

Daughter Number Three. (July 7, 2009). Ellen Raskin Speaks About *The Westing Game* [blog post]. Retrieved on September 30, 2013, from <http://daughternumberthree.blogspot.com/2009/07/ellen-raskin-speaks-about-westing-game.html>.

Raskin, E. (2008). *The Westing Game*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

Shelfari. (2013). Ellen Raskin. Retrieved on September 30, 2013, from <http://www.shelfari.com/authors/a8434/Ellen-Raskin/>.

**Permission to reprint this article has been granted by Sarah Collinge, author.**