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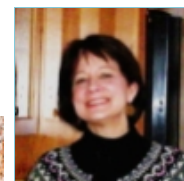
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BETHANY HEGEDUS TALKS ABOUT BETWEEN US BAXTERS

APR. 30TH, 2009 AT 8:31 AM

Today we welcome first-time novelist Bethany Hegedus, author of *Between Us Baxters*, to the Tollbooth. You may recall that Bethany has teamed up with Kekla Magoon, author of *The Rock and The River*, (which was reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* on April 12th), to create a joint school program. The title of their presentation is



[sarahsullivan](#)

"**The Movement: Two Books, Two Authors. One Powerful Presentation - A Decade of Change: Civil Rights in Action 1959-1968.**" When we talked to Kekla in February, she and Bethany were just getting ready to do their first presentation. Today Bethany is going to tell us about her novel and talk a bit about her writing process. Tomorrow, in Part II of this conversation, Bethany will talk about the school presentations and tell us how students are reacting and what sorts of things she and Kekla have learned from their experiences in schools so far.

What is your novel about?

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In *Between Us Baxters* twelve-year-old Polly and fourteen-year-old Timbre Ann have always been friends. It may matter to everyone else in town that their skins are different

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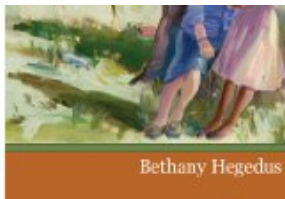
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-  **zuvincnt** : (no subject) [+1]



her friendship with Timbre Ann.

After all, it is Timbre Ann who quizzes Polly on her vocabulary words and whose hand-me-downs Polly wears. It is also Timbre Ann who Polly begins to keep secrets from, including her daddy's drinking. However, Timbre Ann has a way of knowing things about the Baxters, even when it isn't Polly who shares them with her. When black-owned businesses begin to burn to the ground, Polly struggles to cope with the implications that her family may be involved and to understand the true meaning of friendship.

How did you come to write *Between Us Baxters*?

I am a "Yankee" by birth—having been born outside Chicago—but as a girl around Polly's age I moved to Augusta, Georgia. This was a major turning point for me. I left the cold comfort of the suburbs where I knew everyone and arrived in Georgia a misfit. I was teased terribly about my nasal whine.

But after the normal growing pains of moving, I soon came to love the color and cadence of the south.

But as beautiful as the south is; some of its harsher history still exists. Once on a family Sunday drive I saw a sign nailed to a tree, basically an angry warning to keep African-Americans out of the area. I witnessed African-American friends' struggles: waitresses turning up their noses while serving them; being told they weren't "black" by white friends because they were smart and in college prep classes—as if that had anything to do with the color of their skin. Then as a young teacher I taught in an area where the Klan was still active. I was an English and theatre teacher and I was warned how to cast my plays. No interracial romantic love interests. This was in the late 80's to mid 90's. On the one hand I was flabbergasted, and on the other just saddened by the realities of how things *had* progressed over time, that somehow the inner core of hate still existed.

When I moved to NYC to act and instead began to write, all my feelings and memories and experiences of the south found their way to the page.

Are any of the characters based on real people?

No, they're not. I do jokingly say that my own grandmother—like Polly's— had arm fat that jiggled like Jell-O, an observation Polly makes about her meemaw early on in the novel but where



colors, but they don't mind being the only "salt and pepper" friends in town. Or at least Polly doesn't. Raised firmly with her mother's belief that "you can't pick your family but you can pick your friends" Polly clings to

Polly's meemaw has a sadistic streak; mine was a powerhouse but a lovable powerhouse.



I consciously made the choice to not draw on any historical figures of the era or center the book on an actual marking on the civil rights timeline. Instead I attempted to paint this small town, with the Baxters and the Biggses, and the large and small-scale choices they had to make daily that lead to the climax of the novel. It was my aim to create a realistic friendship between Polly and Timbre Ann that may have been the exception in 1959, but that certainly could have existed despite Jim Crow. As in all friendships, Polly and Timbre Ann have their personal scars and jealousies. It is a pet-peeve of mine in books where black and white friendships are portrayed that the white child is seen as "perfect" or "noble"—especially in those set in the civil rights era. Polly and Timbre Ann are both flawed but that doesn't make their love for one another any less real; in fact, I hope it makes it more so.

Did you begin writing *Between Us Baxters* when you were a student at Vermont College?

Yes and no. I went to Vermont College with a draft of Polly's story, which at the time was titled *Night Whispers*; it was a more black and white view of Polly's world. The good guys were very good, and the bad guys were 100% villainous. One editor compared the opening of this version to the novel *Ellen Foster*—a beautiful book that centers on the main character Ellen, escaping the grasp of her violent father. However, though I had strong characters I fell very short of what novelist Kaye Gibbons does in her gem of a book. I didn't create plot arcs well or layer, which was why I applied to the MFA program. I had only been writing a little over a year and I had much to learn.

My first semester at VC, I worked with Norma Fox-Mazer. She is a master of taking the black and the white in the world and mixing it into mesmerizing shades of grey, which she uses to paint her own novels - *The Missing Girl* and *When She Was Good*. Working with her I began to ask myself deeper questions about the world that I had originally thrown Polly into. I brought Polly's mother back from the dead, and changed the friend character from a boy who is younger than Polly, to a girl two years older. This changed everything for me and, in turn, helped me shape the dark side of the book, which deals with racial violence, prejudice, hatred, and fear, with the seemingly less dark aspects: Polly's ties to her family and her friendship with Timbre Ann. I hope, like Norma, that I was able to swirl those shades all together and to depict a world much like the one we live in where good and bad, jealousy and admiration, and love and fear all mix and mingle.

How did the story change from initial concept to finished manuscript? What I mean is, were there any major plot changes or shifts that surprised you?

I am always surprised! I only ever write with a general idea about my ending. I know perhaps the “Big Bang” outward event that will happen and I have a subconscious sense (at least I hope I do) of where my character arc is leading me, but I don’t always know all the details in between. Many character actions towards the end of *Between Us Baxters* I had no idea about until they happened; and usually they sprang to life in the layering, but they weren’t choices I or the characters made consciously. They were a part of everything that came before. That is a mantra from the indomitable Tim Wynne-Jones, who I worked with my last semester at Vermont. “Trust the text. What you need is there.” And, thankfully, it was.

Did you do a lot of research?

I had always been familiar with the civil rights movement so I brushed up on my history by adding several collections to my personal library. I was impacted by Ellen Levine’s *Freedom’s Children: Young Activists Tell Their Own Stories*. In this monologue-like book, depicting interviews with kids who lived through this era—something in one of the personal stories stuck me. Pre-integration, many black-owned businesses thrived as they had full community support. This became a crucial plot point in *Between Us Baxters*, as Timbre Ann’s family, the Biggses runs a successful repair shop that is threatened because it is doing well. Class issues come up in the book, and they are mired and intertwined with race, but the depictions take on a new edge as Polly is forced to wear Timbre Ann’s hand-me-downs, and Timbre Ann knows she holds power and sway over Polly.

I also had to do research on the Citizens Council and the KKK. I watched the *Ku Klux Klan: A Secret History* documentary on A&E a number of times. I looked into the formation of the Citizens Councils that sprang up all over the south after the Brown vs. the Board of Education ruling in 1954. In *Baxters* Polly thinks this of the Citizens Council:

The Citizens Council was supposed to make sure school stayed segregated—colored or white. The Klan, on the other hand, was all about dirty dealings. Always was. Scaring folks whatever way they knew how: lynchings, beatings, cross burnings. But if what Timbre Ann said was true, why, then both groups were cut from the same cloth, even if the Council didn’t play dress up in pointy hoods.

I know you are part of a writing group in New York. Is working with a writer’s group an important part of your process?

It is! I enjoy our weekly Thursday night meetings; our rituals: getting sprinkled with fairy dust at Alice’s Teacup, champagne when a contract rolls in, and creating intentions/goals for the year ahead in January and then having a special meeting in June to see where we are and to amend or recommit. We are colleagues and friends and our members have changed with life circumstances and moves in and out of the city, but we remain a core

group of four. We question one another's work as it progresses chapter-by-chapter and give full reads when we finish a draft. Our meetings are a touchstone for me in my writing week.

Tomorrow we'll return with Part II of our interview with Bethany. Meanwhile, if you'd like to know more about *Between Us Baxters* or about her school presentation with Kekla Magoon, go to

www.bethanyhegedus.com

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 [zuvincent](#) wrote:

MAY. 1ST, 2009 05:00 AM (UTC)

What a beautiful interview! And a fine week of posts--Sarah, I love the idea that you have read to that class for years. I'm inspired on all counts.



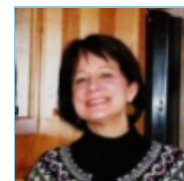
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 [sarahsullivan](#) wrote:

MAY. 1ST, 2009 12:09 PM (UTC)

BETHANY HEGEDUS TALKS ABOUT BETWEEN US BAXTERS

Thanks, Zu. The second graders are the ones who are inspiring. Always.



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