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Writers Against Racism: Bethany Hegedus

August 9th, 2010

Bethany Hegedus is the author of *Between Us Baxters* named a Best Book of 2009 (starred) by the Bank Street Awards Committee. Her new novel, *Truth with a Capital T*, releases this October.



Briefly describe the impact racism had on you as a young person.

As a twelve-year-old, I moved from a suburb of Chicago where I was encouraged to be friends with kids of a variety of races, to a suburb of Augusta, Georgia where although there were the same olive, white, coco, brown, copper-skinned faces as I saw up North I had to walk a much more noticeable color boundary line. I was confused.

In Illinois, there was Sundai down the street, James, the boy in my 7th grade class who I would talk for hours on the phone with (my first real crush) and now somehow if you made friends, or heaven forbid, dated outside your race, it was a major topic of conversation. Suddenly my parents grew concerned about what other's thought as well. My high-school boyfriend, who was black, was met with this response by my father, "What will the neighbors think?" (He has since rescinded that position and hung on his dining room wall pictures of me with whatever man I am serious about at the time: black, white or anywhere in between.)

My best friend of twenty-three years is a dark-skinned woman, who at the time of our growing up, was a dark-skinned girl. Hollie was the only black cheerleader in our predominately white high school. I heard Hollie called "not black" because she was in college prep courses and hung with me and the other drama geeks. It infuriated me to hear Hollie's "blackness" talked about as if it were a sweater she could shed and not an essential part of who she was. This talk was asinine. It upset Hollie and it upset me.

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As a white girl, comfortable with my white friends, my black friends, my Indian friends, my Asian friends I saw all of them go through this “white-wash” labeling. This was the late 1980’s and I am not sure much has changed. I say this, as I was a teacher in the mid 1990’s, where as an English and theatre teacher in a predominantly African-American high school, I was warned on how to cast my plays. No interracial love interests. “The Klan is still active,” the teacher before me told me. “Be careful.”

Has your personal experience of racism impacted your professional work as a writer?

It has. Tremendously. I can’t separate out who I am and what I believe in outside of my move from the North to the South at such an important age.

My first novel, *Between Us Baxters* (Westside Books, 2009) is a historical novel set in the Civil Rights Era, South. It sprang out of hearing that “Klan” talk, seeing a wooden sign nailed to a tree announcing it was “coon” hunting season all year round. It also sprang out of my friendship and comfort with women who did not look like me. Like the runaway bestseller *The Help* (Amy Einhorn Books/Putnam, 2009) I wanted to investigate the bonds between white women and black women, and I do that with Polly’s mother and Timbre Ann’s aunt, Henri. I wanted to see and show racism for what it was and is and show the frailties and faults of all involved, black and white.

In my new novel, *Truth with a Capital T* (Delacorte, 2010) again race is a factor, but now in a contemporary setting. It was easier and less dicey for me as a white woman to write a historical novel where race was a factor than to tackle the issue today. In any case, I did tackle race again and this time with humor and I hope heart. Maebelle, my MC, who has not made the Gifted & Talented program as she moves into middle school, is forced to spend the summer with Isaac, her newly adopted cousin from Chicago. They visit Granny and Gramps in their newly inherited antebellum home, which Isaac points out, must mean Maebelle had relatives who were slave owners. Isaac has his own reasons for feeling uncomfortable about race, and Maebelle, who never contemplated her family may have been involved in such a thing goes about researching her family history.

What I hope to accomplish in *Truth* is to depict a modern-family story that showcases the blended families of those of my friends and family and also asks hard questions as it harkens back to the past.

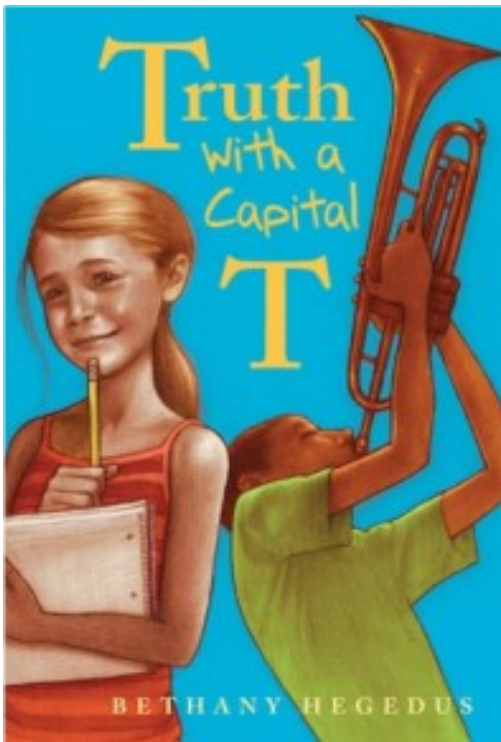
Another project I have undertaken is co-authoring a picture book with Arun Gandhi about the time he spent on the Sevagram ashram with his grandfather as a boy. After a long hard hunt for the perfect publisher, Grandfather Gandhi has found a home at Atheneum (release date TBA.)

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In what way can literature be used to combat the effects of racism and promote tolerance?

There is no better place to allow one's heart and mind a place for exploration than in literature. Readers of all colors can dig into the hearts and minds of other races and cultures and gain a greater understanding. My good friend and Steptoe award winning author Kekla Magoon and I do joint school visits with our books, *Between Us Baxters* and *The Rock and the River* (Aladdin, 2009) and one of the events of the day is to have students perform a readers' theatre from complimentary scenes in our books. We ask the student's to place themselves in Polly's shoes—in 1959, and in Sam's shoes—in 1968. We ask if they agree with the decisions of our main characters. What would they have done differently? Why did Sam and Polly act or react why they did? It is amazing what happens when kids voice their answers or we make contact with the students who stayed silent after the presentation is over. The students we've encountered—kids of all races—want to talk about racism, about loyalty, about betrayal, about where we as a country have come from and how far we still have to go.

Tags: [Bethany Hegedus](#), [Between Us Baxters](#), [The Help](#), [The Rock and the River](#), [Truth with a Capital T](#)

This entry was posted on Monday, August 9th, 2010 at 3:24 pm and is filed under [Writers Against Racism](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

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[August 10, 2010 at 12:45 am](#)

This is such an important topic to address and it doesn't often come from the privileged side of the aisle. Good for you, Bethany! Lovely interview.


3.  [Clay Boggess](#) says:
[August 10, 2010 at 2:39 pm](#)

I think it's a shame that we as a society are still struggling with such a basic issue as skin color. As a white male living in a predominately Hispanic area of the country I don't see myself as different and I know that most of my friends who are Hispanic don't either. We are simply color-blind. That doesn't mean that we don't judge each other's character however.

4.  [Amy Bowllan](#) says:
[August 10, 2010 at 2:46 pm](#)

Clay, that's an important point – character. Hopefully there will come a day when skin color won't matter.

Thanks, Janet, too. 😊

5.  [Doret](#) says:
[August 10, 2010 at 3:55 pm](#)

Thanks for the heads up on Truth with a Captial T. I like the cover.

6.  [Kekla Magoon](#) says:
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Nice interview, Bethany. I'm glad you mentioned our work together. I'm just thinking about how you and I come at the issue of racism from different perspectives yet are able to create a meaningful dialogue about it and what it means to teens who read our books. Us working together is a great model for the teens we meet, too, I think!

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