

The Intersection of Meaning:

A Conversation with Emily Wing Smith

Interviewer's note: *The story behind the publishing of Emily Wing Smith's first novel, The Way He Lived, is the dream of many aspiring writers. As an English major in college, Smith showed promise, winning multiple essay and fiction contests. She knew she wanted to be a novelist, but it wasn't until she read the work of M. E. Kerr that she was sure she wanted to write specifically for young adults. She enrolled in graduate school at Vermont College, where she wrote The Way He Lived as her M.F.A. thesis project. At less than thirty years of age, she sold her book three months after she graduated and is now completing her second young adult novel.*

The Way He Lived presents six seemingly simple perspectives of teenage life through six different characters. Set in the small Mormon town of Haven, the characters' stories spin from the tragic death of sixteen-year-old Joel Espen. Between passing periods, first dates, and driving lessons, the seemingly ordinary moments of these characters' lives weave a complicated tapestry of human experience that is both jarring and gentle. The Way He Lived leaves readers questioning who they are and who they want to become.

A Conversation with Emily Wing Smith

This interview was conducted at the ALAN workshop in San Antonio in 2008 and over the phone. You can learn more about Emily Wing Smith and see a trailer for *The Way He Lived* on her website at www.emily-wingsmith.com.

TAR: *My first impression of The Way He Lived is that*

it is a book that questions, rather than answers. The title could be considered definitive, yet, as a reader, I am still deciding how Joel lived and who he was. Talk about why you left so many instances of ambiguity in the novel and if there is significance to the title.

ES: I got started writing this book because I moved to a new city as a teenager, and when I got there, I was looking at everything through hyper-aware eyes. I really noticed how my school and my new community were different than what I was used to. Also, not long before I moved there, there was a tragic death of a boy my age. I was surprised at the diversity of the types of people who knew him—the stoners, the honors kids, the gymnastics team. People of all different walks of life knew him and loved him. I was interested to hear the stories about him, but because I never really got to know him, it was all very one-sided. I couldn't piece together any real character, and that experience was the real springboard for the story.

My book works with the idea that unless you actually *are* someone and in that person's skin, you can know a million different stories about that person from a million different people, you can even know that person yourself, but you will really never know him or her. The only person who can really know you is yourself. That was when I knew I wanted to write a book that had more questions than answers, not a book that lays things out in terms of what actually happened. I wondered if we really know other people as well as we think

Who Are the Voices in *The Way He Lived*?

The Way He Lived is about sixteen-year-old Joel Espen, who died of dehydration on a camping trip. Told from six different points of view, the characters in this novel try to construct an understanding of Joel—and themselves—in the wake of tragedy.

The Way He Lived invites readers to examine the interconnectedness of a community, the impact one individual can have, and issues of sexuality and politics. The seemingly simple organization of the novel is deceptive. The characters' stories intersect in meaningful ways, ultimately creating a captivating and nuanced portrait of grief that portrays both sorrow and redemption. What follows is an overview of the characters and their struggles.

Monday's Child Is Fair of Face

Always known as the Smart One, Tabatha got perfect grades, scored a 35 on her ACT, and had a nervous breakdown. When her brother dies, she is left with only a shaky sense of self. To cope, she begins writing a blog and takes a creative writing class at the local university. Ultimately, she realizes that her intellectual achievements don't define her and that she is beautiful and interesting, just as Joel always said she was.

Tuesday's Child Is Full of Grace

Debate is Adlen's thing. Her brother plays football. She debates. And she is good at it, or she was when she had Joel as her partner. But there are more than just high school debates on Adlen's mind. She questions the way her faith is practiced and the logic behind her community's beliefs about homosexuality. She uses her razor sharp reasoning abilities to analyze the circumstances of Joel's death and wonders whether he made an intentional choice to die. She suspects he felt trapped by social expectations and realizes that she, too, feels trapped by expectations she has imposed on herself.

Wednesday's Child Is Full of Woe

Miles is from the wrong side of town. He doesn't live in a fancy house or have tons of money, but it never mattered to his best friend, Joel. He is so angry that Joel is gone, he can hardly cope and is slashing tires and planning violent attacks. But Miles doesn't want to be a bad kid, and he remembers when he was good, reading to his grandmother and hanging out with his friends. All he wants is a sense of peace.

Thursday's Child Has Far to Go

Claire's world is shattering. She doesn't have many real friends because she always relied on her family, and now her family is falling apart. She escapes the loneliness of her life by running away to New York, and only by leaving her community is she able to return and find a place in it.

Friday's Child Is Loving and Giving

Norah's life is pregnant with responsibilities. She runs her house by cooking dinner, doing laundry, and taking care of the young children. She also has to worry about her brother, Miles, whose grief has put him on a dangerous course of self-destruction. She barely has a minute alone, and when she does, she is left with her own sadness and confusion over Joel's death. Joel kissed her, and for no reason, rejected her. Then he died, leaving her confused and sad. Now a new boy is interested in Norah, and she has to find a way to let Joel go in order to become the person she wants to be.

Saturday's Child Must Work Hard for a Living

Her boyfriend, Miles, lost his best friend, and then Lissa lost her boyfriend. It is as if Miles is punishing her for his loss, and Lissa doesn't know how or if they can move on as a couple. Then she meets a new guy who helps her realize that it is time for her to let go of the past and search for a better future.

we do. Is it presumptuous of us to assume that we know other people because of what they portray to the world? Teens are dealing with those issues even more than other segments of the population. They question whether the person they are is the person that they portray to the world in order to fit into high school society.

The original title was *Sunday's Child* from the framework of the nursery rhyme structure. The publisher and I decided to change it because having the word *child* in a young adult market might not work.

I do like *The Way He Lived*; it is sort of open-ended because you can come to many conclusions about the way Joel lived and the way he died.

TAR: *How did you know that your own experience in a similar situation would be enough to complete a novel?*

ES: I didn't know it would be enough, which is probably why I graduated from high school almost ten years ago, and the book just came out. When I was younger, I thought that my one experience in this situation may not be strong enough to carry a whole book. There aren't many books that look at how one tragedy can affect many lives or at the aftermath of what a tragedy like this can do.

The characters, like most young adults, seem to be searching for identities. For example, Tabatha defines herself as the smart one and Norah as the good girl, yet as they deal with their grief, they all seem to find that they are more than just one thing.

TAR: *How, if at all, do you think tragedy shapes or reshapes individuals?*

ES: It is easy to get locked into a role, especially as a teenager, when everybody is looking for a place to fit. Sometimes it takes something like a tragedy to shake up people's ideas about who they are and who their friends and family members might be. I also think that in the face of tragedy, we start examining ourselves. We question if we like who we are and who we've become. I think in Joel's tragedy, many of the characters are wondering what would have happened if it had been them.

TAR: *How did getting to know these characters change you? How did writing it affect you personally?*

ES: I definitely think it was a hard book to write because I had to go through grief six different times from six different characters' points of view. Even though Joel was an imaginary character, I had to lose him six times and in six ways. I found out how writing it changed me in my writers group. I was reading several segments of the book, and people would comment that the voices were so distinct. I thought, "Yes, but they are all like me. How can they all be so distinct and all be me?"

In each of the characters, there are pieces of me, but many of them say or do things I am uncomfortable with. For example, when I was writing from Miles's point of view, his voice kept coming into my head and saying, "You don't know shit." I don't talk like that at all. I am actually pretty religious and careful with my language, so I was thinking that I couldn't put his exact words in the book. I wanted to find a way to clean up Miles's language and still be true to his voice, so I wrote a few different drafts. It just didn't sound authentic if I didn't use his voice in the way it came into my head, so I wrote a draft of exactly what I heard from him. That's the draft that ended up in the book. Writing about these characters changed me in that I accept who they are. I quit worrying about what people think about me because I used swears in my book. I just put that aside and let the characters speak for themselves.

TAR: *Do you have a favorite character?*

ES: No. I do feel like each one is a piece of me. In that way, I love and hate each of the characters. They have many of the same flaws and strengths that I do. Someone once asked me if my favorite character was Adam, someone we know very little about, and maybe I do have a crush on him.

TAR: *Why use a child's nursery rhyme in a book for young adults?*

ES: When I was hearing all these voices and thinking about all the people who had known this kid, I tried to come up with a framework that I could

use to tell these stories, and the nursery rhyme just kind of popped into my head. I thought about how knowing all these different people showed the complexity of Joel's own personality. As a kid, I had always liked the rhyme because it stated exactly who you were. Each child represents the day of the week he was born on. It sort of reminds me of a horoscope or the Chinese zodiac. For the book, I liked how the nursery rhyme could bring together lots of different stuff and different characters. When the idea came to me, I thought that it was perfect because it was the kind of thing Joel would love. Joel would love a nursery rhyme he had become attached to as a kid, and he wouldn't be the type of person who was ashamed or embarrassed because he still liked a kid's nursery rhyme. That's not the person he was.

TAR: *The adults in this book have a minimal role. When mentioned, their shortcomings are at the forefront. Why is that? Was it a conscious decision?*

ES: It was a conscious decision. In classes and workshops on writing for young adults, the advice has always been to get rid of the parents. I think that sometimes it can seem almost contrived if you do it knowingly, like if the parents go on a long vacation or if the whole story happens the day the parents are gone. But if you rely too much on the parents, or any adults for that matter, it really isn't a teen's story. It is more a story about how this grown-up helped this teenager, and while I do think that might be true in some cases, that isn't what people, teens especially, want to read about. Teens don't want to be helped by some all-knowing person who rescues them, so I knew I didn't really want the adults to be in the story because that wasn't their role.

TAR: *This book is set in a Mormon community with many customs that are unique to that faith, yet it is a book for all audiences. Talk about your decision to use this setting.*

ES: I am from Utah, and as a teenager, I moved to a city like Haven. I had already lived in an area where I knew a lot of members of the LDS church and was pretty familiar with the religious aspect of

that culture, but not to the same extent as after I moved. My new town was overwhelmingly populated by members of the Mormon Church, probably over ninety percent, and I was just amazed by the way religious beliefs shaped the face of the community as a whole. I thought it would be a fascinating way to tell this story. It couldn't have taken place anywhere else because of the quirks that seemed very normal to the inhabitants of the community, and the setting made the story what it was. It made it believable that Joel's death could be accepted as both tragic and plausible.

Many people outside of Utah, or those who aren't familiar with LDS culture, don't know that most Mormon boys become Boy Scouts. Initially, when I'd tell some of those people about my book, their reaction was: "Well that couldn't have happened. That's crazy, scout leaders being unprepared. It is too farfetched." But people in Utah say, "Oh yeah, something like that happens every summer." Most Boy Scout troops in Utah are nontraditional groups because they are led by members of the church, not traditional scout leaders, and that's why the story needed to take place where it would be thought of as tragic and sad, but not unbelievable.

TAR: *This book is ultimately about dealing with grief. What does *The Way He Lived* bring the reader that other fiction that deals with grief does not?*

ES: I wouldn't say that this book says anything new about grief to the young adult literary community, nor would I go so far as to say that I have anything new to contribute to the young adult canon about grieving. I think what the book does do is provide a very specific look at how others grieve, and that may be universal about the way we all grieve.

I remember emailing one of my Vermont College advisors, and I told her I had just heard David Almond speak. He told us that the more specific a setting, the more universal its appeal. She wrote back to me, "Well, it is not really David Almond who can take credit for saying that. I believe the first person was Aristotle." I was sheepish and thought, "Oh yeah, I don't know my philosophers, but yeah, that's true."

What I was trying to achieve in this book was

to create very specific stories that would, in turn, be universal enough to resonate with all of us. Even if you've never visited a small Mormon community where people define where they live by saying what ward they live in, when you've learned about a world and know a character and how they think, you can find a greater truth. That was definitely where I was going in this book. I wanted to speak about a very universal theme by using a very specific culture and setting.

TAR: *Let's talk about you as a new voice in young adult literature. What were you doing prior to *The Way He Lived*?*

ES: I finished the book as my thesis for a Vermont College Masters of Fine Arts in writing for children and young adults. I sold the book probably about three or four months after I graduated. Before that, I was a college student who still enjoyed reading YA literature. I took lots of young adult literature classes and just sort of worked on my writing. I always knew I wanted to write novels, but after all that reading and all those classes, I came to realize that I wanted to write young adult fiction. After I got my bachelor's degree in English, I just knew that was where I wanted to go.

TAR: *Was there a point where you were discouraged?*

ES: I can't say exactly where it was, but there was a point when I didn't know if all of the stories were going to coalesce and tell a greater story. I knew what I wanted to do and what I wanted the stories to do, but I wasn't always sure how to get there. There was a point when I said to my husband that I didn't think I could tell this story as well as it needed to be told. And he said, "This is your story. You are the only one who can tell it." He is not a writer, I should point out, and I was sort of frustrated by his comments. I was thinking that it was not my story, it was the characters' stories, and I needed to tell them right. It was discouraging, but never

to a point where I thought I wasn't going to finish. I always felt like I needed to write it, and I never doubted that the story could be told. I sometimes doubted that I was the right person to tell it, but in the end, it all came together.

TAR: *How long did it take you to write it? How do you work?*

ES: About a year. I started working on it and there was one point when I thought I needed to take a break. I took a break and wrote a middle grade novel. The break was good because it gave me time to let *The Way He Lived* sit and gel.

I am a stay-at-home writer, and I'm blessed to be able to write full-time. I don't have children, so that makes it easier to write. I am also a homemaker, so I like to get up and put the house together. I am weird about clutter; I like to make sure everything looks neat. I guess I have to feel a state of Zen or something—because then I can write for a couple of hours, take a break, and write for a few more hours. I have a couple of other writer-friends, and we write together sometimes. We meet about once a week at the public library. It is nice to meet with them because writing can be sort of solitary, and it's good to get out of the house every once in a while. It's good to have colleagues because most of the time, as a writer, you are in a business where you don't have many colleagues.

TAR: *Who are you reading right now?*

ES: I just finished *Kitty Kitty* by Michelle Jaffe. I am a fan of hers. And I finished E. Lockhart's *Fly on the Wall*. I am a big fan of hers, too. I mainly read young adult fiction, and usually stuff that is relatively new. I like to keep up on the market.

April Brannon is an assistant professor of English and English Education at California State University, Fullerton. She is a former middle and high school teacher and currently teaches at Bernalillo High School in the summers.