

## *A Conversation with Sarah Ellis: On Fairies, Fiction, and Writing for Teenagers in Back of Beyond*

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• Jennifer McGrath Kent •



*Résumé:* Dans cette entrevue, la romancière Sarah Ellis aborde certains sujets dont la difficulté d'écrire pour les adolescents et la relation entre le réel et le surnaturel.

*Summary:* While being interviewed about her book *Back of Beyond* (1996, Groundwood Books), Vancouver author Sarah Ellis discusses the challenges of writing for a teenage readership, the importance of fairies, and the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds.

Sarah Ellis has written several books for children and in 1991 was awarded the Governor General's Award for *Pick-Up Sticks*. Her novel *The Baby Project* also received critical acclaim, winning the Sheila A. Egoff Award. An astute and provocative collection of short stories, *Back of Beyond* is Sarah Ellis's first book for young adults.

**Jennifer Kent:** *There is a supernatural element injected into these stories that one doesn't find in your other novels. At the same time, the stories are grounded in a very solid, everyday realism. Why did you feel the need to incorporate the weird and the unexplainable into this book, at this time?*

**Sarah Ellis:** Well, there are a couple of reasons. One is that before writing this book I was doing some research on fairies for a scholarly paper I was preparing about the use of fairies in contemporary children's fiction; not in fairy tales, but incorporated into fiction — books like Susan Cooper's *The Bogart*, William Mayne's *Hob the Goblin* — and I got into one of these modes where you over-research. I got so fascinated with the topic that I read way too much for the paper. The paper was long written and I was still munching down all this stuff about fairies, and I became particularly interested in fairy-belief in Newfoundland, which is, really, the relic of fairy-belief in the British Isles and Canada. So that was all in my head. I just loved the variety, the ingenuity, the sheer creativeness of fairy-belief. I mean, people are making up these entire worlds completely — hierarchy and politics, beliefs and philosophy and appearance and clothing and games and animals. It's like a culture making up a story as a group.

At the same time, I had been trying to write for young adults. I don't consider my other books for young adults, but for children, and I was trying to write a story for young adults and failing, failing, failing! It just seemed with this one story I was flogging a dead horse; it seemed very phoney to me. It felt like "Oh, who am I? I'm this incredibly uncool, middle-aged woman — what am I doing on their turf?" And I actually have this reaction to quite a lot of the young adult literature that I do read. I think, "This is phoney; this is co-opting their culture." *But* as soon as I started thinking about the relationship between fairy belief and adolescence — which hit me like a ton of bricks — how so many of these stories have to do with passion, with society, big things in your life, love, sense of self-worth and destiny. All those questions are really dealt with in fairy stories, and it struck me that these are stories about young adults. As soon as I got that into my head, then all my self-consciousness about writing for teenagers just disappeared. I felt confident again.

This is the easiest book I've ever written. I'm not a fluent writer, and I don't find writing easy, but this one ... it seemed like the stories were already there and all I had to do was to tell them.

**Kent:** *These stories are still very grounded in everyday realism. How do you think the supernatural changed the definition of reality in the stories?*

**Ellis:** I think it's like what it says in the little epigraph at the very beginning — there is that little, subtle shift in your view of the world, which is the thing I remember so strongly from being fifteen and sixteen myself. One morning I'd go out and things that looked stable and cosy the day before suddenly looked dangerous to me, and weird like a Diane Arbus photograph. My *family* started to look like a Diane Arbus family to me. So it's that kind of shift in perception.

**Kent:** *Do you think that the supernatural has the ability to throw the real world into sharper relief? ... or does it just remind us that the lines of reality are smudged anyway, even at the best of times?*

**Ellis:** No, I think more the former; that this brush with the *other* makes all the ordinary meat and potatoes stuff of life stand out in sharper dimension.

**Kent:** *Even with the supernatural twists and turns, realism is still the dominant element*

—the stories, the settings, the situations, the characters—are all very believable and readily recognizable. You couldn't really classify this book as "fantasy" — or could you?

**Ellis:** Well, I've tried to tread that narrow line. I've tried to give the sceptical reader a route out of it, so that if you think it's just a coincidence, or you think it's somebody with a hallucination, well, maybe ... like in the last story, about two girls who go on a hike. You could think it's just two strange people, a brother and sister who came to visit, and maybe they had no evil intentions at all. So I tried to give the reader an out, while not undermining the power of the visitors. I mean, there are already stories about *visitors*.

**Kent:** *In the Back of Beyond stories, the characters are confronted with some very real and gritty social issues: broken families, eating disorders, sexual harassment, family violence. And yet the supernatural is not used to circumvent these obstacles, but rather to aid the protagonist in dealing with them. How does this affect the characters, and the rite-of-passage theme that runs throughout the stories? Could the characters have persevered without a supernatural nudge?*

**Ellis:** I couldn't have *written* them without the supernatural. When you asked that question, I realize one thing I really believe in is that the evil is not *out there*. I mean, this is what bothers me about a lot of shlocky horror writing. It suggests that the evil is *out there*, it's some other thing. But it's not. It is in us. It's in our families, it's in our society. I think it is an immoral use of horror to make it appear that it's a force alien from anything *we're* doing. I'm more interested in the evil that we do by our small actions, by our tiny cruelties.

**Kent:** *Despite the difficult social issues that the book raised, I still found the overall tone of the book, and the stories themselves, to be gentle and optimistic. How important is the "happy ending" to a young audience?*

**Ellis:** Well, it's not like I set out to do that. I guess it represents my basic optimism, and also a kind of area of writing about young adults that I don't get to read very often. For example, the relationship between teenagers and young children. All the teenagers I know either babysit or take care of their little cousins or volunteer in ESL daycares. I mean, most of the teenagers I know have strong relationships with preschoolers, and that's never written about. In young adult literature, teenagers only relate to other teenagers, which of course, is true in the main. I mean, it is a very solipsistic age but in a couple of my stories I have teenagers caring for little kids because that's what the teenagers I know do.

**Kent:** *Just to go back to a point you already mentioned, at the very beginning of Back of Beyond, you quote a passage on "fairy" experiences from a book entitled Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland. I found this fascinating since your books typically have a very "West Coast" feel. Is this a meeting of East and West Coast supernatural sensibilities or is fairy folklore basically transcontinental?*

**Ellis:** Well, that's a big question. Can fairies live on the West Coast? My kind of fairies. I mean there's obviously native fairies but that's not my tradition. I decided not to worry about that question but just to say that they could. For one thing, the death of the fairies has been predicted since Shakespeare. Every generation thinks that fairies existed in the previous generation but not now,

because of technology, because we're too crowded, too busy, and we've driven them away. We think this, but every generation thinks this too, so I decided I would jump in and decide that you could have a fairy living in the coast mountains near Vancouver or on the Gulf Islands or in downtown Vancouver. These are not traditional fairies; they are my own version.

**Kent:** *Three of the stories, "Tunnel," "Knife" and "Net," are written from the perspective of a male protagonist. Do you find it difficult to write in the voice of a young man? Are you aware of a discernible difference between male and female sensibilities when you are writing their characters?*

**Ellis:** Well, that was much more deliberate than anything else in the book. I decided that having written four novels all about girls, that if I was a writer I should be able to imagine the male point of view. And once I started it, it seemed to come to me naturally. After I started, I didn't think about it too much. Someone who read them said to me, "You know, so many of these stories have ambiguous gender right to about page five," and that certainly was not something I had noticed. Of course, if you are telling in the first person, that happens. Unless you say, "I'm a guy" how's the reader going to know? I mean it seems obvious to me, but maybe it's not.

**Kent:** *How did writing this collection of short stories compare to writing novels for children?*

**Ellis:** It got me into darker territory. I think one of the reasons I was having trouble writing for young adults was I didn't particularly want to relive that time in my own life. It's fine going back to being eleven, but going back to really remembering fifteen, I was resistant to doing that. I mean, remembering the sheer embarrassment that happens when you're that age — I didn't want to do that. But it was just like writing for kids — once I started, then more memories came flooding back, more feelings, more — stuff.

**Kent:** *Do you have a favourite among these stories?*

**Ellis:** I think my favourite is the one that is nobody else's favourite, and it's "Sisters." And I know why it's my favourite. It's because it really is based on two old ladies that I knew. The younger sister died, oh, maybe ten or fifteen years ago, and I've really been thinking about those sisters my whole life. The story was similar, about they thought there were sisters but really one was the aunt of the other, and she didn't find out until her sister died. And because I had such affection for the two sisters, that's my favourite story now.

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*Jennifer McGrath Kent is a writer and critic of children's literature. She earned her Masters of English from the University of Victoria, completing a thesis on modern fantasy novels for children. She currently resides in her hometown of Moncton, New Brunswick.*