

A Conversation with Catherine Gilbert Murdock about *Front and Center*

Q. *Front and Center* is the third and final book in the series about D.J. Schwenk and her family. Did you find it difficult to say goodbye to this cast of characters?

A: Yes and no. I'll miss them, I'm sure, but we've spent almost six years together, and it's time for all of us to make some new friends. D.J. is so grown up—far more grown up than I was, or am, or will ever be—and it's nice to imagine her off on her own, making the world a better place.

Q. Why did you write a third book about D.J.? Are you sure her story is over?

A: I never meant to write a third book, just as I'd never meant to write a second. But the volume of mail was so huge! It seemed that no one wanted the story to end. And I had some questions as well that I still needed to answer. I do have thoughts about her future, I'll confess, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get them down. I'd really like to write about her freshman year of college, but there are so few YA books about that. This is absolutely shocking, but it's not surprising, not when you think about it. YA is read by twelve-year-olds. You can tone down high school, more or less, for middle-schoolers, but college is just way too raw. I'm not talking about the drinking or the sexual activity, but about the sheer reality of the collegiate experience. "All my life I've wanted to be a doctor, and now I'm flunking organic chemistry" . . . That's as much college as keg parties are, and it's no less disturbing to a sixth-grader. So I'll probably just keep D.J.'s future to myself, and let readers do the same.

Q. In *Front and Center*, D.J. deals with the college basketball recruiting process and you describe her feelings of angst and indecision so well. How do you know so much about this process?

A: While researching *The Off Season*, I'd inadvertently come across a great deal about college sports recruiting—for example, the biography of Adam Tagliaferro, a Penn State football player with a spinal cord injury. As a total nonathlete, I'd always viewed sports recruiting as a huge Get Out of Jail Free card. You have this great physical talent and so win yourself a scholarship—boom!—while the rest of us peons have to toil away writing essays and taking SATs and actually applying. But of course it turns out that the reality is far different. Recruiting requires years—years—of work by athletes, parents, and coaches . . . One college coach told me; in so many words, "The system is completely out of control." Plus there's no more guarantee of success than in the regular admissions process. I'd argue it's even more stressful given the omnipresent threat of injury, the unknowns of future play (Will the student pick a winning team? Will s/he get playing time? Will the "star" athlete flounder at the university level?), compounded by the expectation of academic success as well.

I had no idea of this all when I began *Front and Center*—I certainly didn't know it while writing *Dairy Queen*, which explains why there's not nearly enough detail on recruiting in that first

book! It was great fun getting to know several college and high school coaches, picking their brains. I didn't want D.J. to be a superstar, in part because I hadn't planted that seed well enough in the earlier books, but also because superstars aren't as interesting. "Oh, I'm perfect, I'm fantastic, everyone wants me" . . . Bring out the kryptonite for that dude. I found it far more intriguing (1) to make her abilities a bit more borderline within the D-I community, and (2) to have her doubt herself. The plot conflict of "will she get in or won't she" is far too pat. I much prefer the drama of her struggle not over *whether* she'll get in but whether she even *wants* to play. D.J. has spent her whole life feeling like an outsider and a bit of a loser, in the sense that she's never felt like a winner. When one is in that mind-set (and far too many of us have wallowed there, myself included), it's luxuriously easy to dismiss the winners—as D.J. phrased it in *The Off Season*—as having "easy lives." She's as much of a snob in her own way as Brian is. And in *Front and Center* she's forced to confront the truth that winning isn't any easier than losing is.

Q. You receive a lot of e-mails and letters from fans. Are there any in particular that stand out? Or an overall theme that stands out?

A: The fan mail is truly extraordinary. I don't know if it's her personality or her voice or her everygirl quality, but D.J. inspires the most passionate, heartfelt, unvarnished—certainly unspellchecked!—correspondence I've ever seen. At first I thought this was normal for authors, even though my agent and editor kept saying no. Now that *Princess Ben* has been out for a year, I finally understand how right they are. My *Princess Ben* mail is lovely: "Thank you for the wonderful book. Please write more fairy tales, as I truly enjoyed your volume." Whereas *DQ* and *TOS* produce—and I quote— "Your my favorite author . . . You are an exceptional righter." Isn't that completely endearing? And it was from a librarian! (Joke.)

Everyone asks for a third book, or mentions that they can't wait to read it. I also get lots of advice on how D.J. should progress romantically. Strong feelings about Brian—readers either love him and hope he sees the light, or they want D.J. to drop him like a hot rock. Here's one example: "I was reading the FAQs on your website and you mentioned DJ and Brian possibly getting back together in *Front and Center*, please do NOT let that happen. I never really liked Brian and DJ deserves someone better. If I choose who DJ fell for it would be Beaner or Kyle, please take this into consideration."

Q. Speaking of which, *Front and Center* isn't just about basketball. Right?

A: Oh my goodness, it most certainly is *not* just about hoops! The "front and center" of the title refers not just to the attention D.J. receives as a player and her extreme awkwardness playing point guard, but also to the romantic predicament in which she finds herself. As much as she's always pined for a boyfriend, she discovers—just like college hoops—that the reality is far more challenging than she'd ever dreamed. *The Off Season* was about D.J.'s struggle with external obstacles, her brother's injury most of all. *Front and Center* is about the heartbreak she faces inside. The heartbreak of love, but the heartbreak of fear as well. The heartbreak of insecurity.

Q. Since the publication of *Dairy Queen*, you've traveled quite a bit promoting your books. What has this experience been like?

A: I just adore speaking to schools—absolutely love it, especially middle-schoolers (though eighth-graders can be a tough nut sometimes). But I have to confess that the travel wears me out. I see Skype in my future . . . It's remarkable to observe the variety of educational experiences in this country. When I visited Vermont, I was greeted outside the school entrance by fifteen giddy middle-schoolers. In Florida by contrast, a "Level 4" escort had to walk me into every building; students would never be allowed outside, and certainly not alone. So those were two different experiences. Once I was inside, however, the commitment of the librarians, and enthusiasm of the students, was absolutely the same. Allow me to say that a good school librarian is worth her weight in gold. Twenty-four karat.

Q. How do you spend your time when you aren't writing?

A: Oh, I'm such a skilled procrastinator. I could write a book about it . . . or not. We've been renovating this house since about 1908, it feels like, and now the stuff we renovated needs renovating. So that's an active day job. Also I am a fanatical (and not in a positive sense) gardener. We moved into a house with pure lawn, and I've spent the past six years attempting to return it to swampy forest. For the record, my way is more expensive than the obverse. But we have frogs now, boasting their lungs out all night long, and we had mallards until the damn cat drove them away, which was probably for the best for any future ducklings. I also enjoy cooking, which anyone who reads *Princess Ben* can probably guess, and I kill loads of time doing that.

Q. What are you working on now?

A: I had big plans to write a 1930s spy thriller set in London, but it turns out that that is *really* difficult, so I may set it aside for a bit and pen a sort-of sequel to *Princess Ben*. Fantasy is really where I belong, however saturated the market might be. Maybe I'd be willing to write more Dairy Queen books if we got D.J. some magical powers! Although Curtis would make a much better wizard. He's got the mind-set for it.