

The BiblioFiles: Jacqueline Kelly

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. My guest is Jacqueline Kelly, author of *The Evolution of Calpernia Tate*.

The book is set in Texas in 1899, where 11-year-old Calpernia Tate lives on a large farm with her parents, grandfather, and six brothers. Calpernia is being groomed for a typical 19th century female future of cooking, piano lessons, sewing, knitting, and debutante parties. But what she really wants is to be a scientist. Calpernia is utterly fascinated by the natural world around her and longs to go to university. Her only ally is her imposing grandfather, an amateur naturalist who divides his time between his library, his laboratory, and the fields, streams, and woods around the house.

Narrated by the frank, insightful, defiant, and delightful Calpernia, the book is an amazing and humorous combination of personal story, natural history, and life in turn of the century Texas. The audiobook version of *The Evolution of Calpernia Tate* will be available at the end of this month.

Jacqueline Kelly joins us from Texas. Ms. Kelly, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Thank you very much. I'm glad to be here.

DR. DANA: I don't typically start these interviews with the authors reading a passage from their books, but I was wondering if you might be willing to read a few pages from the opening chapter of your book.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Well, certainly.

“By 1899, we had learned to tame the darkness but not the Texas heat. We arose in the dark, hours before sunrise, when there was barely a smudge of indigo along the eastern sky and the rest of the horizon was still pure pitch. We lit our kerosene lamps and carried them before us in the dark like our own tiny wavering suns. There was a full day's work to be done before noon, when the deadly heat drove everyone back into our big shuttered house and we lay down in the dim high-ceilinged rooms like sweating victims. Mother's usual summer remedy of sprinkling the sheets with refreshing cologne lasted only a minute. At three o'clock in the afternoon, when it was time to get up again, the temperature was still killing.

The heat was a misery for all us in Fentress, but it was the women who suffered the most in their corsets and petticoats. (I was still a few years too young for this uniquely feminine form of

torture.) They loosened their stays and sighed the hours away and cursed the heat and their husbands, too, for dragging them to Caldwell County to plant cotton and acres of pecan trees. Mother temporarily gave up her hairpieces, a crimped false fringe and a rolled horsehair rat, platforms on which she daily constructed an elaborate mountain of her own hair. On those days when we had no company, she even took to sticking her head under the kitchen pump and letting Viola, our quadroon cook, pump away until she was soaked through. We were forbidden by sharp orders to laugh at this astounding entertainment. As Mother gradually surrendered her dignity to the heat, we discovered (as did Father) that it was best to keep out of her way.

My name is Calpernia Virginia Tate, but back then everybody called me Callie Vee. That summer, I was eleven years old and the only girl out of seven children. Can you imagine a worse situation? I was spliced midway between three older brothers-- Harry, Sam Houston, and Lamar-- and three younger brothers-- Travis, Sul Ross, and the baby, Jim Bowie, whom we called J.B. The little boys actually managed to sleep at midday, sometimes even piled atop one another like damp, steaming puppies. The men who came in from the fields and my father, back from his office at the cotton gin, slept too, first dousing themselves with tin buckets of tepid well water on the sleeping porch before falling down on their rope beds as if poleaxed.

Yes, the heat was a misery, but it also brought me my freedom. While the rest of the family tossed and dozed, I secretly made my way to the San Marcos River bank and enjoyed a daily interlude of no school, no pestiferous brothers, and no Mother. I didn't have permission to do this, exactly, but no one said I couldn't. I got away with it because I had my own room at the far end of the hall, whereas my brothers all had to share, and they would have tattled in a red-hot second. As far as I could tell, this was the sole decent thing about being the only girl.

Our house was separated from the river by a crescent-shaped parcel of five acres of wild, uncleared growth. It would have been an ordeal to push my way through it except that the regular river patrons-- dogs, deer, brothers-- kept a narrow path beaten down through the treacherous sticker burrs that rose as high as my head and snatched at my hair and pinafore as I folded myself narrow to slide by. When I reached the river, I stripped down to my chemise, floating on my back with my shimmy gently billowing around me in the mild currents, luxuriating in the coolness of the water flowing around me. I was a river cloud, turning gently in the eddies. I looked up at the filmy bags of webworms high above me in the lush canopy of oaks bending over the river. The webworms seemed to mirror me, floating in their own balloons of gauze in the pale, turquoise sky."

DR. DANA: I love that passage. When I first read it, my interest was immediately sparked because when I think of 19th century stories, I'd never place them in the heat of Texas. And the thought of all that clothing that you had to wear and the lives that you had to lead without air conditioning. It also reads like a classic. I wonder if you have some classic influences for your writing.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Well, interestingly enough, my influences, I would say, are sort of the school of British classical children's literature. And I specifically am thinking of *The Wind in the Willows*, which is one of my favorite books of all time. *Alice in Wonderland*. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. *The Hobbit*. Those sorts of things.

DR. DANA: Well the book is set in Texas in 1899. And it's one thing to research a historical period, and it's another to take all of the events, the philosophies, the language, even the household objects of that time-- and fold them into a fiction story. How did you approach these things while you were writing the book?

JACQUELINE KELLY: Well I've always been fascinated by that particular era in history. I'm not sure why. I think it's because everything was changing so fast. And that, I find really interesting. Years ago, I saw two photographs of Congress Avenue, which is the main downtown boulevard here in Austin, that runs from the lake straight up to the Texas Legislature. And in 1900, it was a wide dirt street. There were lots of horses. There were horse-drawn carriages. There were hitching posts. And I saw another photograph taken from exactly the same perspective approximately six years later, maybe 1906. And the horses were all gone. And the carriages were all gone. And they had been replaced by early automobiles.

And I found that quite stunning because it had happened so fast. And that's always interested me.

DR. DANA: In the intro to the book, you mention her mother's wig-- something called a rat. Was it hard to take those objects and things and put them into the story? Did you feel daunted by the task?

JACQUELINE KELLY: Well, I think because I've been always so fascinated by that period of time, I've been soaking up details like a sponge, through my own reading, without even really realizing it. Plus a lot of those details, for example, come from my own mother talking about her own mother, who probably did have a rat that she used to create her coiffure upon.

So I know I did have to do some research. I specifically went to the Texas Handbook online, which told me quite a bit about Caldwell County and Fentress and Lockhart and Austin in 1900. So that was terribly helpful. I also looked at some newspapers of the time, which were very interesting. I did try to locate a copy of the Fentress newspaper, but was unable to find one. So if anybody out there has ever seen one, I would love to know about it.

I did see the Lockhart newspaper. And that gave you a real feel and flavor for the time. I did go to the Austin City archives to see what photographs might look like in the paper in 1900, and discovered that I had narrowly avoided a terrible faux pas, because photographs were not published in the newspaper in 1900. They were still using line drawings and illustrations.

DR. DANA: Some of them quite amusing.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Yes. But I narrowly dodged that one. And a lot of the story was influenced by my own house. I do own a big old house out in the country, in Fentress. And this is where the story originated. The house is probably about 130 years old. I bought it from the granddaughter of the man who built it. So the house had never been outside the family until I came along.

But I remember very clearly the moment when I walked through the front door of the house. And I was not looking for a house. I owned a house in Austin 40 miles away. But I walked through

the front door and a voice in my head said, this is it. I want to grow old and die here. And you can bury me in the back. It was quite a moment. And I knew that I had to have the house.

So after going through much trauma, I bought it and moved out there. This was in the mid 1980s. And then promptly ran out of money to fix it up. So the house is still falling down around my ears. But several years ago, I was lying on the day bed in what I would call the parlor, and there was a window unit puffing away sort of ineffectually, next to me. Part of the house is cooled, and part of it is not. And I thought, ugh, it's so hot. How did people stand it here 100 years ago? And right in response to that question, this whole family, including Calpernia, sprang to life. And they basically dictated the first page of the book to me. I set it down immediately, really without even thinking about it. And that's how the whole story began.

DR. DANA: That is really interesting because it is the first page of your book that immediately drew my attention. It made me sit up, put my feet on the floor, and move to my favorite reading chair, and there I settled in for a couple hours.

JACQUELINE KELLY: That's a nice picture. That is the house talking. That is not me. That is the house speaking, and I just had to write it and get it down.

DR. DANA: The main character, Calpernia Tate, is in a very large family on this farm in Texas in 1899, and she is different from girls of that era. She wants to be a scientist, and she is constantly asking questions. She writes them down in her notebook. Questions like, why do dogs have eyebrows? And these questions and observations and her inner thoughts are written in such a natural, familiar way. I'm wondering if you were like Calpernia when you were 11.

JACQUELINE KELLY: I think that Calpernia is probably a bit more curious about the world than I am. I was a very bookish child, and I spent most of my time with my nose in a book. She does too, but she's much more involved in going out into the world, and taking a look around, and seeing what's going on. You know, looking at the rabbits, and the hawks, and the moles, and the beetles and bugs.

There is a lot of her in me-- a lot of me in her-- interestingly enough, there's also a lot of my mother in her. People wonder if my mother is like the mother in the book, and she is not at all. My mother, who is now 79, and my father also, are both very funny people. I'm very lucky to have funny parents. And I think that there's quite a bit of my mother in Calpernia, as well.

DR. DANA: Was the book conceived by the setting of Texas and the house that you were residing in, and not as much the character of Calpernia?

JACQUELINE KELLY: It started with the house. It all started with the house. And then she separated herself quickly from the rest of the family. So she stepped forward and demanded center stage. And so that's how I ended up building the book around her.

DR. DANA: Folded into it are Calpernia's struggles with her brothers and her mom and her dad, and just the average pains of growing up. I'm remembering specifically-- there are ways her family always manages to get in the way, even of the story. They're walking home Christmas

Eve, and her brother pinches her, daring her to scream out when all the grownups are walking with them back from this church ceremony. And so, she retaliates by shouldering him into a puddle and making him walk home with wet shoes. That's just placed in the middle of the story. And it just made it seem so much more real. It really did seem like I was in the family.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Well you know, that's interesting because I'm an only child. So I had to create my own brothers in this book. And I don't quite know where they all came from. I would love to have a brother-- an older brother-- like Harry, who is your favorite, and is someone that you can always look to for help and comfort when you need it.

But I thought she also needed some brothers who are just pests. So I had to give her some of those. And then I thought it would be nice if she had a younger brother who was just very young and very sweet, and sort of like a pet to her. So that's how I ended up creating all these brothers.

DR. DANA: I'd like to ask you about two other characters in the book. Grandfather and Viola. Grandfather is Callie's science mentor, and Viola is the family cook. She's African American. These are the two people in the book that Calpernia can turn to when she needs honest advice, even though they come from completely different worlds. Can you describe them, and tell us how you developed grandfather and Viola?

JACQUELINE KELLY: Well, Grandfather is a combination of two or three of my friends, plus a bit of my own father. And he looks, in my mind, like Charles Darwin late in life. There are several photographs of Darwin in his sixties and seventies with the long, full white beard. And I think perhaps the very last photograph ever taken of him really made me think of Granddaddy. Now I didn't find that photograph until I was halfway through the story, and then found it online. But I wonder if I had seen it at some point earlier in my life and just remembered it because the physical description of the grandfather is very much like Charles Darwin physically was, late in his life. So I think it must be more than just coincidence that I described him and built him that way.

The thing I like best about Grandfather is that he absolutely expects her to behave as an adult, and to be serious about her studies. He does not see her as a child. I think he's incapable of seeing that she really is only 12 years old. But he treats her as a peer. And he has standards that he expects her to live up to. And as a consequence, she lives up to them. So he's one of my favorite characters. I grew up without a grandfather, so I had to create my own. One of my grandfathers died before I was born, and the other grandfather lived in New Zealand, while I was growing up in Canada.

So I only got to see him every 10 years or so. And he was not at all like this grandfather. So I had to create the grandfather that I would have liked to have had, and this is him, I think.

Now Viola-- I don't quite know for sure where Viola comes from. I know that at this in history, and with this well-to-do family, that they would have had a cook-- there'd be no question about that-- and where she comes from-- I don't know. She just sort of sprang up and shouldered her way in to the story. And she's very plain spoken. And she's very forthright about what's going on

around her. She's part of the family, but she's not part of the family. So she has an interesting perspective on what's going on in the household.

And I saw a certain freedom that could be, between her and Calpernia, perhaps that would not exist for the other people in the family. And I think that part of that freedom was the ability to be completely honest with each other about things that were important to them.

DR. DANA: And poor Viola has to suffer through Calpernia's cooking lessons. Poor Calpernia. She wants to study science, but she's forced to do all sorts of things in the kitchen.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Right. She has to learn the domestic arts, much as she does not want to. Part of that comes from my own background. I was a Brownie, and then a Girl Guide, growing up in Canada. And I must be one of the very last people on this whole continent who had to learn how to darn a wool sock. Now, how many people do you know who know how to do that?

DR. DANA: I don't know.

JACQUELINE KELLY: It's kind of a dying or dead art. So I remember darning this wool sock-- this brown wool sock-- with a darning egg. Which is kind of a wooden oval that you stretch the sock over. You pull the heel over it. Then you go back and forth with your needle and thread. And I remember even then thinking, why? Why do I have to do this?

DR. DANA: Exactly.

JACQUELINE KELLY: This is just a waste of time. I could be reading a good book. That was my reaction to all of that. Whenever I was asked to learn to do something domestic, my response was, but I could be reading a good book instead.

DR. DANA: Yes, I was the only girl in my Home Economics course who managed to sew her project pillow to her shirt during class. Just not for me.

JACQUELINE KELLY: So you understand.

DR. DANA: Yes. So why-- I'm guessing that your website sprang from the book. Your website has a section called Meet Callie. And the website, I should say, is jacquelinekelly.com. And in that Meet Callie section, there's a photograph of a girl. I'm not sure if it's from that time period. There are images of Texas habitats, and there are excerpts from the book. Why did you build this section into your website?

JACQUELINE KELLY: For a couple of reasons. Because people who are not from central Texas have no idea what central Texas looks like. When you say Texas to somebody from Manitoba, they think of sand and desert and cactus. And they don't understand that there's a huge area of Texas that's rolling hills with lush rivers and green, growing oak trees, and pecan trees.

And so I thought it would be interesting to give people who wanted to see what the area was like a glimpse. Plus the countryside is such an integral part of the book that I thought it deserved to

be in there. The photograph of the young girl-- I also found that halfway through the writing of the book. I was just fiddling around online one day, looking at old family photographs that people post. And there was this picture of this young girl staring straight into the camera. And it was really the expression on her face that captivated me. And I thought, oh look, there she is. There she is. Her face was just so open, and alive, and curious about the world that I fell in love with her expression and with her face.

I know nothing about her, except that this photograph came from approximately 1895 or so, and that her name was Goldie. Which I thought was lovely. And I think if you look closely at the photograph, you can tell that she was probably a strawberry blonde with freckles. And that may have been why people call her Goldie. I don't know.

My girl Callie is not a strawberry blond. In fact, there's very little physical description of her in the book. We know that she has long hair, and we know that she's 12. And that's basically about it. I purposefully did not want to describe her too closely, because I wanted readers of various descriptions to perhaps see themselves in her shoes.

But I do hope people will go and look at this picture on the website. Because it truly captivated me, and it truly captures, to me, the essence of my character.

DR. DANA: So is Calpernia 11 or 12 in the book?

JACQUELINE KELLY: She's about to turn 12. Well the book opens in the summer, so she's 11. And then she turns 12 in October. Right.

DR. DANA: A big birthday party.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Right, right.

DR. DANA: And what sort of reaction are you getting from readers about this book?

JACQUELINE KELLY: I am getting some wonderful reactions. I wasn't sure, when this book was published, what sort of reaction I would get from it. But what I love is going to these reader events, and then there are young girls there who are between, oh, 9, and 12 or 13. And many of them have read the book, and many of them are excited that they're just about to start it.

And I've been going to mother-daughter book clubs, which is wonderful. I wish we'd had those when I was growing up.

DR. DANA: Yes.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Yes, and then the last library appearance I did-- this wonderful young girl showed up with her jar of tadpoles. And she had made a little aquarium with rocks, and algae, and sand in the bottom. And she had brought her tadpoles. And she had also brought her scientific journal that she was keeping on her tadpoles. And I took photographs of these. These

are posted at the Facebook Fans of Calpernia Tate page that my publisher, Henry Holt, made for me.

So if you go to that Facebook page, you can see the photographs of this little girl and her collection. And I just loved it.

DR. DANA: That's wonderful.

JACQUELINE KELLY: I thought, well-- it is wonderful-- I thought, this is really what it's all about. This is what the point of the book is all about. And it just makes me so happy to see this happening.

DR. DANA: Well Jacqueline Kelly, thank you so much for joining us today.

JACQUELINE KELLY: Thank you so much. I've really enjoyed it.

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