

• Meet the Author •

Deborah Wiles



Deborah Wiles was born in Alabama into an Air Force family and spent her growing-up summers in a small Mississippi town with an extended family full of southern characters. Today she writes about them and they live on in her stories. Her work has received the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award, the PEN/Phyllis Reynolds Naylor Working Writer Fellowship, and a Golden Kite Honor from SCBWI. Her newest novel, *Each Little Bird That Sings*, was awarded the E. B. White Read Aloud Award, and was a 2005 National Book Award finalist. Deborah lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she avoids the traffic, climbs Stone Mountain, and grows the world's most beautiful zinnias.

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

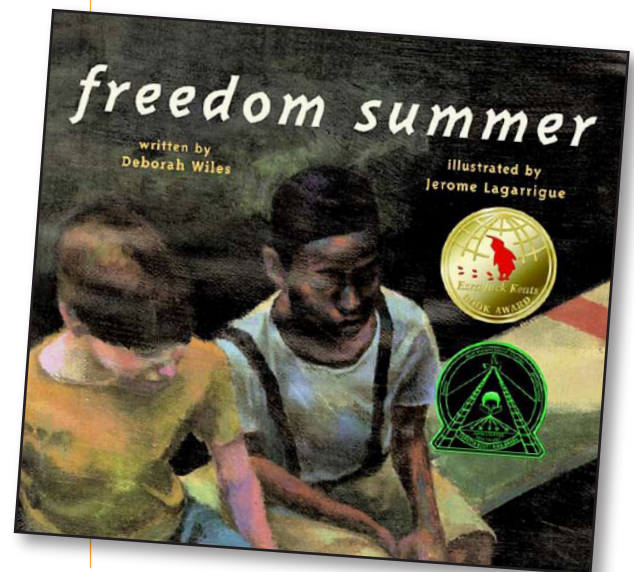
Your “Note about the Text” in *Freedom Summer*, gives us a glimpse into how you came to write this story. Please talk more about growing up in the South of the fifties and sixties and its influence on this story.

DW: We moved whenever my father was transferred in the military, but we spent summers in Mississippi at my father's childhood home. I loved the place and the people with all my heart. I felt loved unconditionally in Mississippi, by a cast of real characters who told outlandish southern stories that I knew must be true. In that insular world, I never noticed a hint of racism. Then the town pool closed, the ice cream parlor closed, and I began asking questions, began watching the news, began paying attention, and my world changed. Mississippi is a land of contradictions. Those contradictions—great love, great hate—form the basis for *Freedom Summer*. Joe and John Henry are best friends, and they love one another in the way I was loved during those summers in Mississippi. They end up making a

life-changing decision for themselves and one another.

There is a strong sense of place in your book. How many of the visual images and sensory details of the story are drawn from your personal history? What are your memories?

DW: Mississippi was a feast for my senses ... it was a world apart from any other I knew—and I lived all over the globe. I remember so well the feel of the butterbeans I shelled on the porch with my great-grandmother, the taste of sweet iced tea and fried okra, the smell of a hot summer afternoon and my sweat rolling down my nose, I remember how wonderful that dark-blue water felt as I plunged into Lake



Walkaway, and the sound of the locusts rising and falling in that old chorus, the way the moths danced around the porch light at night—all of these details find their way into *Freedom Summer*.

Do others of your books also consider the racial strife in the South or reflect your childhood experiences growing up in the region?

DW: Most of my fiction is centered in the deep South and is full of its eccentricities, right down to the names I give my characters. I created white worlds in my first two novels, as that was the only world I knew at first. In the novels I'm working on now, I'm creating a racially diverse South. I'm following in fiction the progression I lived as a child, moving from a Mississippi where I had relationships with only white people, to a world that encompasses lots of racial diversity and its accompanying joys and difficulties. I'm finding it rich and rewarding work; I'm hoping I do these stories justice. That's what I tried to do in *Freedom Summer*.

Freedom Summer is dedicated to "the children of the movement" in part. Please share your feelings about these children and what the civil rights movement meant to them, to us.

DW: I can't speak about what

the civil rights movement meant to anyone but me, and what it meant to me was that I had an awakening. It was the beginning of a true sense of empathy for me (and it came at an age-appropriate time, the year I turned eleven), of wondering what it would be like to be someone else—a child, particularly—in a situation that was different from mine socially, culturally, racially. What would it be like to be treated so unfairly? And what could I do about that? What could anyone do? Did we have power? Could we claim it? How? These are issues I struggle with today, as well.

What do you hope children know about the Civil Rights Act and its meaning for individuals in the sixties as a result of reading about Young Joe and John Henry?

DW: I'd love for children to read *Freedom Summer* as a story about friendship, justice, and empowerment. In schools I always point out that 100 years passed between the abolishment of slavery in this country and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which is something that children often don't realize, that they have parents and grandparents living today who witnessed and who may have participated in the struggle for civil rights. The passage of time is a hard concept to teach, even to adults sometimes. The concept of justice-for-all, the formation of character, and the

consequences of choice—these are ideas I wanted to explore in *Freedom Summer* and would love for teachers to explore with students, for children to explore with one another.

You are well known as a middle grade novelist, yet *Freedom Summer* is a picture book. What is exciting, interesting, rewarding, and/or challenging about writing in this shorter format?

DW: It's hard to write short! And within this shorter form, it's crucial to develop characters and stories with depth and heart—I love this challenge. I think of *Freedom Summer* as a prose poem, which is how it was written.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

DW: They can visit my Web site at www.deborahwiles.com.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of five picture books, most recently *Our Librarian Won't Tell Us ANYTHING! A Mrs. Skorupski Story* (UpstartBooks, 2006) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.