

CECE BELL INTERVIEW

Below is a transcript for the podcast interview with children's book author, Cece Bell.

ADL: Can you share with us a little bit about your childhood and when and how you decided to be a writer?

Cece Bell: For the most part, I had a really wonderful childhood. There was a little hiccup there when I lost my hearing. My father is a doctor and my mother was a nurse and so it was a very medical family. It was a really good childhood. I spent a lot of time drawing and my main interest was actually drawing much more than reading. I was a very good student but I really wanted to be drawing. I didn't really think at all about becoming a writer so much as I wanted to make sure that I was doing something creative and I actually wanted to be a children's book illustrator. I figured that out by the time I was in college but since no one would hire me to illustrate their books, I started writing them myself so that I would have something to draw. It was really drawing and my lifelong love of drawing that led me writing in the first place.

ADL: Growing up, what kind of books did you like to read?

Cece Bell: I always liked picture books even when I was supposedly too old to be reading them. You're never too old to enjoy a picture book! My favorite books to read in the middle grade range were books by Beverly Cleary and by Judy Blume. I liked reading about strong girls who had everyday problems kind of like mine. I also loved books about strong females in the past like Caddie Woodlawn and Little House on the Prairie, those really strong female characters with everyday problems. Those were my absolute favorites.

ADL: Why did you write El Deafo? Did you have any personal experiences that inspired you to write it?

Cece Bell: Yes! The story is actually my own childhood story. I did lose my hearing when I was four. I was sick with meningitis. It took me a while to realize this but my experience was very different than most of the people I knew growing up. Because I felt so different as a kid, there were certain challenges that I had to face through it all.

A couple of things inspired me to write it. The first was a personal exchange that I had in a grocery store with a very rude cashier. It was a moment where... what I should have said was 'I can't hear very well. Let's start over.' But I couldn't because all of my life I had been pretending that I didn't have this problem. That exchange left me so upset and frustrated that I thought to myself, 'I am going to write a book that explains to people what I need from them.' I was finally ready to speak out and say yes, I do have trouble hearing and it's not a big deal. It becomes a big deal when I don't say it. That was the personal thing that happened; I wanted to create this manual for hearing people to better understand what it was like for deaf people.

The other thing was that I read the book *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier and when I saw that I thought, 'Oh, this is how it's done. This is the perfect way to tell my story.' So it was a little bit from the book world and a little bit from an actual frustrating experience that I had. I was finally ready to just say, 'OK, I'm deaf. What's the big deal? It's time to put it out there.'

ADL: *As you know, El Deafo is April's ADL Book of the Month. What is the message you are trying to convey in the book?*

Cece Bell: The main thing I'm trying to show is that everybody feels that they are different in some way and is different in some way. The main message is: no matter how different you are, the things that make you different are what make you unique and if you share those things with other people instead of being shy about it and not share it, you're going to miss out. And other people aren't going to know how awesome you are if you don't share the things that make you different. Those are really your superpowers, especially as you grow up.

The other thing that I wanted to show is that all these kids who may have a disability like myself are really just human beings like everybody else and they have the same hopes and desires and needs as everybody else. It's always best to start with treating people with disabilities like you would treat anybody else first and then if you need to make an accommodation, you do that. But when you first meet somebody with a disability, it's best to just be yourself and then if something more is needed, then you accommodate.

ADL: *In El Deafo, the main character struggles with acceptance of being deaf, friendship and the usual growing up issues. How do you think this resonates with children?*

Cece Bell: All kids are struggling with all of those things, except maybe not the being deaf part. Everybody is struggling with trying to find friends who understand who they are, who like them and not for some other reason like ‘I’m going to be your friend because your dad makes a lot of money’ or anything like that. A lot of the kids who read the book who aren’t deaf keep coming back to the friendship stuff as something they completely understand or some of the stuff about having a crush on ‘that kid’ and not being able to say anything. A lot of the book is simply about my own character and personality traits. I am very non-confrontational and I think a lot of kids are non-confrontational and that has also resonated as well.

ADL: How does your identity shape what you write?

Cece Bell: I am a very optimistic sunny ‘pollyanna’ kind of person and my own family is extremely funny. Humor is the thing that brings my family together more than anything else. My stuff is usually funny and it’s very optimistic—happy endings all around. Almost every book that I’ve written has something to do with friendship, trying to make friends or needing friends. Even though I don’t have millions of friends, I have a small group of really close friends. Those people are really, really important. That’s always been true of me and I think that is a really big part of why I write so much about friends. Also, my identity being this non-confrontational person definitely comes through in my work too.

ADL: Why did you decide to make El Deafo a graphic novel?

Cece Bell: The main reason was because I wanted to use speech balloons. With speech balloons, I was able to show what my character was hearing or not hearing every moment of the book. For example, if I’m not hearing anything, then the speech balloons from other people are empty. Or, if I’m hearing what the person is saying but I’m not looking at them--because I’m a lip reader, then all I hear is gibberish and I’m able to put that in the speech balloons. So it’s a nice immediate way for a person reading the book to become me. When they see that gibberish, they have to try to figure out what the other person is saying just like I have to do every day. I think it’s just a really neat way to show that. If I wrote it in purely text form, I would lose that. There would be all this description about what I was hearing. This way, all you have to do is look at it and you can see ‘Oh that’s what she’s hearing or not hearing.’ So it was mostly because of the speech balloons and also because it’s just a really fun way to tell a story.

ADL: You both write and illustrate your books. What is your process for both writing and illustrating?

Cece Bell: I always write the story first. I usually come up with the idea—usually on a walk. A lot of my ideas have been written down on little scraps of paper and when I'm ready for a new book, I just open up my drawer and look at the scraps of paper and mush them all together in some weird way. That's how some of my books have together. I spend a lot of time on the writing and I don't even think about whether or not I can draw the story that I'm putting out. I hate drawing cars and I don't like drawing adults. But if the story calls for an adult driving in a car, then okay, I'll do that. I go through many, many, many drafts of the story before I'm happy with it. When I am happy with it, then I start the whole storyboarding process and the illustrations get more and more refined and there's a lot of back and forth between the pictures and the words trying to balance it all out. And then eventually, I'm make a little book dummy and that's what I send to my publisher and maybe the person will go for it and maybe not. There's a whole new process when the editorial comes in. That's the basic process—I don't start drawing until the story is where it should be.

ADL: What has been the response and feedback about the book?

Cece Bell: The response has been amazing and bigger than I could have ever expected. I've gotten many, many letters from parents and kids with varying degrees of hearing loss. That's been really neat. A lot of people, including adults, have written in and said things like, 'You just told my story. This is my story.' I've heard about a lot of people buying multiple copies of the book to pass out for friends and relatives to help them understand what life is like for them. So it really did become a manual for people to use. And then the people who don't have hearing loss are just completely fascinated by it and I think people are really grateful to have this window into the experience.

And folks in the "capital D" deaf community who use sign language more for communication have been extremely receptive and kind and understanding about my own childhood qualm with sign language. I was very nervous about putting all of that out there but I think everybody likes to read about everybody else's experiences so it has been really positive.

ADL: *Why do books matter especially when it comes to issues of disability, bullying, friendship, bias and empathy?*

Cece Bell: Books matter because a lot of kids who are going through difficult times need to see themselves in books. They need to know that they are not alone in whatever their struggle might be. It also helps other kids see what life is like from another person's perspective. I think it's really important for people to be open up to that. If you're ignorant about another person's struggles, then you're not going to be as helpful and empathetic in the long run. It's just really exciting when you do see yourself in a book. You think, 'Somebody understands. This writer understands me.' That makes you feel so much less alone.

ADL: *In your opinion, what is the best way to help children understand the themes from your book?*

Cece Bell: What's great about the graphic novel is that you can read it over and over again. It's a quick easy read and the more you read it, the more you might see little details or you might understand things a little better. What might be really fun for the kids is to read it together and talk about ways they may have had a similar experience or how it's different from their experience. I've heard about kids in a class where most of the kids are hearing and maybe they have on deaf classmate and talking with that classmate about how was this like what they went through or how it is different. The technology has changed so much. I think that re-reading the book because it's easy to read and sharing it with each other would be a good way to get to the themes.

ADL: *Can you tell us about some of your other books?*

Cece Bell: Most of my other books are picture books. As I said earlier, most of them are about friendship in some way. They're all a little bit wacky. I like them to be a little bit weird because I'm weird. There's also an early reader book in there called *Rabbit and Robot* for slightly older kids. The book that I have coming out in June is not about friendship at all. It's a bizarre conversation between a donkey and a yam about grammar and proper word use. That's just completely silly and is a new direction for me because in the end, the donkey and the yam are not friends. Most of my stuff is silly, funny and brightly colored and like myself, on the optimistic side.

***ADL:** If you were to describe your work as a profession other than writer or illustrator, what would that be?*

Cece Bell: I would say something like fun maker or even entertainer. If the books are helping kids in some way to learn to read or understand the human condition better, I want them to get there through fun. I want to be sneaky about those things. I want to entertain them with razzle dazzle, bright colors and funny text. So I would say entertainer would be a good way to describe me.

***ADL:** What are you working on now?*

Cece Bell: I am working on a second book about *Rabbit and Robot*. And there's a new twist for that and maybe a new character showing up in that book. And I'm also illustrating three early reader books that my husband Tom has written about a detective who happens to be a Venus fly-trap. That's been fun. So I'm doing a little bit of just illustrating and also writing and illustrating this other book for *Rabbit and Robot*.