



19 Girls and Me: Frequently Asked Questions

Children's book author, **Darcy Pattison** answers questions about her new book, *19 Girls and Me* (Philomel, June, 2006, ISBN: 0399243364).

Q: Where do you get your ideas?

A: I'm so glad you asked. I'm on a mailing list with 100 other people who write for children. One day, we were discussing the question of where we get ideas.

RickW said, "You can get ideas from anywhere. I'm looking outside my window right now and there's a ladder leaning against the wall. You could take that ladder and write a story about it."

With sudden excitement, I asked, "Rick, may I borrow the ladder?"

"Take it," he generously said.

I wrote the first draft of *19 Girls and Me*, which included all the imaginative play in which the children engage. The first imaginative play starts with the kids climbing a ladder to the top of Mt. Everest to play with the Yeti. That draft emerged spontaneously, almost without thought. It took many drafts for the story of John Hercules Po and his brother to develop, but the imaginative play was there from the first draft and started with that ladder.

You might notice that the dedication of *19 Girls and Me* includes a thank-you to Rick for the loan of the ladder.

Q: Why 19 girls?

A: I was reading a book about writing humor, which suggested that exaggeration is an effective tool for making a situation humorous. 19 girls and one lone boy seemed funnier than 10 girls and 10 boys.

Q: The kindergarten class travels to many imaginative places. How did you choose these particular places?

A: It all started with that ladder. It suggested that the kids would climb and the highest place is Mt. Everest. Of course, if they went there, they would want to play snowballs with the Yeti. In each case, the object they see triggers the locations. Water leads to the Amazon River. A wagon leads to the race car track. A shovel means they will dig down to China. And a hammer means they'll build a skyscraper and go even farther into space. I took each item and pushed it as far as I could to find the fun answers.

Q: Steven Salerno illustrated *19 Girls and Me*. Do his pictures in the book match the pictures you had in your head as you wrote?

Steven Salerno's artwork is very different from the art of Joe Cepeda, who illustrated my other books, *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman* and *Searching for Oliver K. Woodman*. Cepeda focuses on color; Salerno, on line. Salerno's work has luscious lines that take graceful forms and create a sort of retro-look, including a deliberate nod in one spread to the art in classic *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. But Salerno goes beyond this deliberate reference to create captivating images such as the rain forests with "wild and freaky birds" and the luminous moon from which the children sing. His art expands the recess play into a solid form and infuses the book with the joy of imagination.

Q: How did you pick the right words for this story?

A: Beyond the issues of story, *19 Girls and Me* is very much about the sounds of language. I paid attention to the stresses, rhythms and repetitions, trying to create language that would be a joy to read again and again. Look for places where assonance (repetition of vowels), in particular, draws the story forward. For me, getting the story right is just the beginning. HOW you tell a story is everything.

Q: What advice do you have for parents or teachers to help them get the most out of this story?

A: *19 Girls and Me* is about friendship in a kindergarten class. It's a good story to read to kids as they approach kindergarten or any new experience for the pre-school or early grades. The child should be reassured that even in strange new circumstances, they will find friends.

Q: How are teachers using this book in the classroom?

A: Teachers are telling me that it's a great read-aloud book: the kids learn when to chime in and ask for this story over and over.

