

Praise for  
**LAUREL SNYDER**

\* A Geisel Award Winner \*

\* National Book Award Nominee \*

“This book is a treasure—a touching story of friendship, loss, and finding beauty in the everyday. I absolutely loved it.”

—R.J. PALACIO, author of *Wonder*, about *My Jasper June*

“A tender, atmospheric, and memorable novel that explores the intimate, restorative power and beauty of friendship.”

—*New York Times Book Review*, about *My Jasper June*

“A contemplative commentary on the transition from childhood to adolescence, and from ignorance to awareness.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review), about *Orphan Island*

“Laurel Snyder has written a story that curls around the heart and pulls in tight.

A wondrous book, wise and wild and deeply true.”

—KELLY BARNHILL, Newbery Medal-winning author of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, about *Orphan Island*

**PJ** OUR  
WAY®

[www.pjourway.org](http://www.pjourway.org)

LAUREL SNYDER

*The*  
Witch  
*of*  
Woodland



WALDEN POND PRESS  
*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

Walden Pond Press is an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

The Witch of Woodland

Copyright © 2023 by Laurel Snyder

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Children's Books, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway,

New York, NY 10007.

[www.harpercollinschildrens.com](http://www.harpercollinschildrens.com)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023930682

ISBN 978-0-06-283665-6

Printed in China

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

First Edition



## *A Prologue Is a Thing That Comes Before the Story*

**W**hen I told Bea I was going to write this book, she didn't get it.

"Why?" she asked, glancing over at my desk, where I'd set up a little writing studio for myself, with three freshly sharpened pencils and a new composition book neatly laid out. On the wall above my desk, I'd taped a quote from some grown-up writer that said, "A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song." I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but I'd found it on a site of inspiring quotes for writers, and it made me happy. I love birds.

"I just don't get it," said Bea, frowning at the sign. "Why a book? That sounds like a lot of work. What's the *point*?"

I didn't have a logical answer. I just knew I needed to tell

my story. I could feel it inside me, waiting. “Because I want to,” I said. “Anyway, it’s going to be nonfiction. The *truth*. Or as close as I can get, anyway.”

“The truth?” asked Bea. “Nobody will believe you, Zippy. I barely believe you, and I was there. Anyway, who’s going to read your book? Twelve-year-old authors aren’t a thing.”

“I’m thirteen now,” I reminded her.

“Same difference,” said Bea. (Bea is still twelve, but she’s mature for her age and looks it. She dyes her blond curls pink every couple of months. She also gets dress coded more than anyone else in our grade. Sometimes she draws tattoos on her arms with Sharpie.)

“Well, maybe I’ll just leave you out of my book, then,” I said. “If you’re going to be like that.”

“Fine by me!” said Bea. “I’m not sure I want to be on the record as part of this whole thing anyway. But whatever . . .”

“*Whatever* yourself,” I said back. “Why don’t you just go home if you aren’t going to be any help?”

“Fine,” she said, hopping up from my bed, where she’d been sitting crisscross applesauce with her dirty shoes on, even though she knows I hate that more than anything. “I think I will.” And she did.

“FINE!” I shouted after her as the screen door slammed in the front room. (Door slamming is the kind of small physical detail good writers put into their books. We learned about it at school, in our unit on Powerful Language.)

In case you're wondering, Bea has been my best friend since kindergarten, and for a long time, I thought we were as alike as two people could be. When we were little, we pretended to be sisters, even though I had long dark hair and she had her mop of blond ringlets. We wore matching clothes, and whenever we wanted to change our favorite color or TV show or candy, we decided that together with a vote. We shared everything.

Our friendship isn't like that anymore, which is kind of sad and kind of not-sad. I still don't entirely understand how that happened. We both changed, I guess. But even if things are different and we fight, Bea is still my best friend. We talk on the phone, and sleep over on weekends, and sometimes she copies my math homework or I copy hers, which I should probably not put into this book, just in case someone actually does read it. But I am determined that this book will be the *truth*. And the truth is we sometimes cheat at math.

The *other* truth is that Bea is family to me. She just is. So if you're reading this and thinking that she sounds mean or rude, I hope you'll remember that no matter what, she's my person.

But irregardless, and to get back to this book I'm writing and which you are (maybe?) reading now . . . Bea was wrong that day in my room. It wasn't the *same difference*. Not really. Thirteen isn't twelve and today isn't yesterday. Sometimes important things happen and everything changes, so slowly you don't notice or so quickly you nearly miss it. Or

*you* change, in ways you never expected. I guess that's what happened to me last year—I grew, whether I wanted to or not. And what Bea doesn't get is that I don't care so much if other people believe my story. That's not why I'm writing this all down. I'm writing it because *I'll* read this book. I know I will. Over and over, for the rest of my life. Trying to figure out what happened. Trying to understand it all better . . .

Look, I know that as time goes by, I'll forget the details. I've forgotten so much already! But I'm hoping I can hold on to the parts I still remember, the ones that haven't slipped away. Because someday I'll turn into a grown-up. Someday I'll have a job and a car and a dishwasher, and if I'm not careful, I'll wake up one morning and I'll be too old to remember what happened the year I turned thirteen.

So I'm writing this book. Starting today. I definitely *am* writing this book, no matter how it turns out. Even if it ends up being a total failure. And if you're reading it somewhere in the future, whoever you are, I hope you'll like it, and believe my story. That would be nice. But if you don't, that's okay too. I know now that people are going to believe what they want. And what happened *is* pretty wild. I almost couldn't believe it myself.

As a matter of fact, that was sort of where everything began, I guess. With me not believing . . .



## *How It Actually Started*

Okay, I don't want to sound obnoxious, but wasn't that good? Didn't that sound like something from a real book? All that stuff about "that was sort of where everything began, with me not believing"? I hope so! I revised it over and over. I worked really hard.

Anyway, I guess *where* everything truly began was in the kitchen of my house. And *when* it began was one awful day last August, when I was still twelve. That day, I was sitting there after school, eating a bowl of rice pudding at the kitchen island and worrying about the Fall Fling. Because walking home from school that day along Woodland, Bea hadn't been able to talk about anything else. We'd started seventh grade a few weeks earlier, and that morning over the intercom,



they'd announced the big fall dance. I'd barely registered the announcement myself, but the entire way home, as we'd walked past the overgrown yards and honeysuckle-covered fences and colorful old bungalows of Woodland Avenue, Bea had gone on and on about the red minidress she wanted to buy for the dance, and about how she was hoping her mom was going to let her wear actual makeup, as opposed to just boring lip gloss. We trudged along, sweating in the heat (August in Atlanta is pretty unbearable), and the whole conversation made me as uncomfortable as the weather.

Then Bea stopped walking for a minute in the shade of a huge weeping willow that hung out over the street and said, "The main thing, Zippy, is that you don't want to *overdo* it. Because that's the kiss of death in middle school. You know what I mean?"

I absolutely *didn't* know. "Kiss of death?" I asked, staring out through the willow branches that Bea and I had swung on only a few years earlier. "What are you talking about? Overdo what?"

"It!" Bea said as she parted the branches, stepped through them, and began walking again. "You know. Like, the dance, the dress, the whole deal . . . everything. Now that we're in seventh grade, you want to keep it cool."

"But . . .," I said. "How would I *overdo* it? How would I keep it cool? I don't even understand what any of that means." I glanced down at my black leggings and matching T-shirt,

the long wavy hair that fell to my waist, feeling bewildered and not remotely *cool*.

Bea laughed. Then she said, “Hey, I have an idea! What if we went to the dance with Lane and Tess and Minnah and Leah?”

“The . . . walking group?” I asked. “But we aren’t *in* the walking group.”

Bea shrugged. “Maybe we could be.”

“Ummm, *okay* . . .,” I said.

Lane and Tess and Minnah and Leah were a bunch of girls who lived in our neighborhood. They hadn’t been a friend group in elementary school, but suddenly in sixth grade, they’d all started walking home together, laughing and gossiping so loudly I was pretty sure they wanted everyone to listen in. They had matching friendship bracelets and they usually stopped at Morelli’s for ice cream after school, to order the weird hipster flavors nobody really likes: rosemary olive oil or whatever. On weekends, they hung out in the church parking lot a few blocks from my house, where they met up with eighth-grade boys and left diet-soda cans behind. They all seemed endlessly comfortable and happy, and I low-key hated them. Of course, there were other groups of kids all over the neighborhood who walked home together, but if you mentioned *the* walking group, everyone knew who you meant.

“Yeah. That’d be fun, right?” said Bea.

Immediately, I felt my chest flutter. *NO*, I’d wanted to say.

*No no no. Definitely not fun. Not fun at all.*

For as long as I could remember, it had always just been Bea and me. Me and Bea. People had tried to split us up, and we'd been shuffled off to summer camps without each other and sorted into different classes several times, but none of that had made any difference. We'd been set up on playdates to *make new friends*. But even then, we stuck together. We wrote notes. We came up with code names for people we didn't like. If one of us had a stick of gum, we automatically tore it in half to share. You know what I mean? *Best* friends. Whenever she says something that hurts my feelings, I try to remind myself of that.

Here: I'll give you a perfect example. Something that happened a long time ago, at Bea's eighth birthday party. Bea's mom had invited a handful of other kids to her party, in an effort to *broaden her social group*, but since I was her best friend, I got to sit next to her when she blew out her candles and sleep in the foldout sofa with her while the other kids crawled into their sleeping bags on the rug. Only I did a stupid thing. I drank way way way too much root beer. At dinner and during the movie, and even after that. So then, when it was time to go to sleep, I had to pee like *whoa*. But of course the other girls were all falling asleep on the floor around us, and I was afraid of waking them up or stepping on them. I was sure I'd annoy everyone and then they'd all have to listen to me through the thin bathroom door as I peed a million gallons of root beer. So

instead I closed my eyes and forced myself to sleep.

Which was fine. Until I woke up in the darkness . . . completely drenched.

Have you ever peed the bed? Do you know what that feels like? It's miserable, and hard to explain. It's like . . . the pee is warm coming out of you, and it actually feels kind of nice when you're half-asleep. But somehow, the minute you're awake and the pee is on your skin, it turns cold and sticky and everywhere, all down your legs. There was so much root-beer-pee that night! I tried to roll out of it, but the the whole bed was just stiff wet sheets. So, for a minute, I lay there, holding my breath and listening to the other kids breathing and rustling and whistling faintly in the darkness around me. What could I do? Beside me, Bea was silent, her face buried in her pillow, her hair a mass of wild, curly shadows.

Finally, I was too miserable and clammy and chilly to stand it anymore. My teeth were chattering, and I was never going to be able to sleep like that. Even if I made it through the night, Bea would wake up in the morning and discover my disaster. What would happen then? The pee would only stain and smell worse as it dried. So at last I inched over and tapped Bea's shoulder. "Pssst," I whispered. "Are you awake?" (Even though I knew she wasn't.)

Immediately, Bea flipped over and squinted at me. "Sure," she said. "You just woke me up. Everything okay?"

I shook my head. "No," I whispered, trying not to cry. "I

wet the bed. What should I do?” Around us, the room was silent and still.

Bea didn't reply at first. I remember being afraid she might laugh out loud and wake everyone up. I felt like I was holding my breath that whole time. Waiting to see what might happen as she lay there, thinking.

Then, suddenly, she nodded and said, “Okay, then. Me too.”

“Huh?” I asked. “What do you mean? You too *what?*”

Bea sat up. “Me too,” she said. “I peed the bed too.” And then much more loudly she shouted out, “Hey, Mom, I peed the bed!”

On the floor all around us, people began to stir. But Bea didn't seem to care at all. She just stood up on the creaky-sprunged foldout sofa, hopped over me, and jumped down onto the floor. Then she turned on the light over the stairs and shouted up to the second floor, “Mom, hey, Mom. You need to change the sheets. I peed the bed! And I peed on Zippy. Poor Zippy!”

Somehow, her loud, wonderful lie made everything okay. Maybe because she was the birthday girl, nobody even laughed. Mel came downstairs looking sleepy and confused. She stripped our sheets and remade the bed while Bea and I both ran up to her room for fresh pajamas. Then we all went back to sleep until it was time for chocolate chip pancakes in the morning. Nobody else ever said a word about it, and Bea