

Q and A with Priscilla Cummings, Author of *Autumn Journey*

The following **Q and A** is the reprinted email exchange between the author, Priscilla Cummings, and teacher Leola Saville's students at West Side Elementary School in Cumberland, Maryland on June 4, 2005:

Dear Ms. Saville and students:

Thank you so much for the email and all your questions about *Autumn Journey*. I am so touched that you read it together – and gratified that you had so many wonderful questions. Let's get to those questions right here:

Wesley: You asked if I wrote *Autumn Journey* because of an instance I had when I was young. The answer is yes and no. Yes, because I think that my childhood is part of my experience as a person and that every author inevitably brings in a little bit of himself or herself into a story. My parents divorced when I was in high school so I remember the pain of a family being pulled apart. I also lost a grandfather when I was young. And I lived on a farm just like the one in *Autumn Journey*. In fact, my life on the farm is where I developed such a passion for animals.

Melissa: What inspired me to write *Autumn Journey*? I was inspired to write *Autumn Journey* after moving to Maryland and seeing geese fly over in the fall. I wondered where they were coming from and how they found their way to the Eastern Shore each year. Researching Canada geese and the Atlantic flyway inspired me even more. I began to think of a goose that became lost on its first migration and was found by a young boy . . . **You also asked how long it took to write the story.** The process of writing *Autumn Journey* – hold on to your chair – spanned eight years! I worked on it a little bit here and a little bit there. I also had two young children at that time and was writing picture books (such as *Chadwick the Crab*). But *Autumn Journey* was my first novel and a real learning experience for me . . . I'm happy to hear you liked the cover. A man named Jim Daly who lives in Oregon painted the cover art for *Autumn Journey*. I did not choose him, my publisher did. But I think they made a good choice. I am lucky to actually own that painting now – my husband bought it for me as a birthday gift after the book was published. Today, it hangs in my dining room.

Gary: You asked where I gathered all my knowledge about geese. When I research a book I first do a lot of reading – magazine articles, newspaper clips, books. Then I often go out do more research “in the field.” In the case of *Autumn Journey*, I literally went out to a field and met with a hunter on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The hunter taught me a lot about geese and about hunting. He taught me how to break open, load and fire a shotgun so I could learn and experience everything Will did on his first hunting trip . . . **I am glad you wanted a sequel to *Autumn Journey*.** That is a real compliment to me, as an author. But I needed to move on and write other kinds of stories.

Kara: You asked whether I enjoyed writing for older children. I do! It’s very challenging, but it’s also a lot of fun. I have vivid memories of when I was your age and I like writing about all the different things we go through as young people . . . **If I could write a fantasy with me as an animal and main character, I would be a cat.** I have two cats named Shoogie and Sam and they are so smart and so funny. Everyone dotes on them and they seem to live such wonderful lives. As my daughter says, they spend most the day “sleeping in comfortable positions.”

Sage: I was touched to hear that reading *Autumn Journey* helped you through a difficult time following your grandmother’s death. We all lose people we love in our lifetimes, sometimes when we’re very young. There is no such thing as “getting over” the loss. We simply learn how to live with it. But you’re right: no matter how bad things seem, something good usually results. I hope you will remember this all your life.

Catherine: I am so happy to hear that reading *Autumn Journey* made you appreciate your life. Certainly Will had to face up to a lot of difficult things, but he learned what was really important in his life, didn’t he? My inspiration for writing the story came from wondering about how the geese found their way to Maryland each fall, but also, I wanted to write about a boy struggling to find happiness in a situation where a parent had lost a job because there is so much unemployment in our world today. A lot of companies downsize and people lose jobs they had held for many years. Even though these people didn’t do anything wrong, they often lose their self esteem. This is what happened to Will’s father. I thought this was an important issue to write about even though it never happened in my own family. . . **Did I ever cry when I was writing the story?** I definitely had tears in my eyes many times. I felt very close to Will, almost as though he

really existed. In some ways, it was sad for me when the story ended and the final manuscript was sent off to be published. In many other ways, it was a very happy occasion because *Autumn Journey* was my first novel and to see it published was a very special moment in my life. I have written five novels now, but *Autumn Journey* will always have a special place in my heart.

Justin – You say you experienced an array of emotions reading *Autumn Journey* and wondered if this was intentional. I wanted my readers to experience a range of emotions because that's what life is like. As for your other question – most all of the descriptive imagery I use in my books comes directly from my research. I used to be a newspaper reporter before I was a children's book author and I learned as a journalist how important it was to gather the details for a story in order to make it come alive . . . I left the end open because I wanted my readers to imagine what would happen next and because, once again, that's what life is like. We don't always know exactly what's going to happen next, do we? Will's father returned, the family was reunited and the goose was set free. In my mind, that was a good ending. Another children's book author named Richard Peck once spoke at a conference I attended and I heard him say that a good book is not an answer, but a question. I like that comment. A good book should make you think and wonder . . .

Courtney – It's a compliment to say an author has a good eye for a book. Thank you. I think about each of the ideas for my stories for a long time, sometimes a year or more, in my head, before I ever write the first word. But recognizing a good story idea is something else. I have found that all of my novels started with something in real life that struck me emotionally.

Abby – You have it exactly! I did pretend I was Gray Feather and imagined what it must be like for a goose to arrive at a creek where other geese had already been. I knew from my notes what such a place would look like so I went to it in my mind and described it. Whenever I write, I try to put myself in my characters' shoes and see the world from their eyes.

Austin – I enjoyed reading your note very much. It's wonderful to hear readers pick up on the things I tried to slip into the story – such as understanding how depressed people sometimes need time away in order to

make sense of things. And appreciating our grandparents – they are so special and so smart because they have experienced so much of life. Listen to them! And letting go of the goose at the end – I had that image in my mind when I wrote the first words to *Autumn Journey*. It gave me direction during the whole process. In fact, when I visit schools now I tell students that I always know the ending to my story before I write even if I don't know everything that happens in the story because I need to know where I am going . . . And yes, I remember my visit to West Side in 2000. In fact, your school gave me a lovely scrapbook from the visit that is on the shelf in my office. Maybe, if I'm lucky, they will invite me back someday!

I think that wraps it up. Once again, thank you for reading *Autumn Journey*. Have a great summer and don't forget to read some books!

Priscilla Cummings