

What's So Good About ...? is a series of 15-minute programmes focusing on the popular children's writers: Jacqueline Wilson, Roald Dahl, Malorie Blackman, JK Rowling and Jamila Gavin.

What's So Good About ... Jacqueline Wilson? comprises two episodes that explore Jacqueline's life and successful career as a writer. Similar in style to a docusoap, the programmes offer children a unique opportunity to see Jacqueline at work and play and to come to a closer appreciation of how and why she writes as she does. These well-paced programmes are a must for all Jacqueline Wilson fans and a superb resource for any Key Stage 2 class working on author studies.

Jacqueline Wilson talks directly to camera, making her audience feel as though she is speaking to them confidentially. This results in a relaxed and informal view of her both as a person and a writer. We see her in much the same way as the complex main characters of her books – she appears as a disciplined and methodical writer, but full of surprises and anomalies.

A hugely popular writer, Jacqueline has produced 70 titles to date and is published in many languages all over the world. She has sold over 5 million copies of her work, yet she chooses to live in a small, modest house that is completely overrun by books in every single room! The only outward sign of success is perhaps her magnificent collection of elaborate rings, which adorn every finger and thumb.

Starting at her home we travel with Jacqueline to schools, where we hear children asking questions and responding to her books; to the publisher, where she discusses the detail of her work; and to a variety of other locations, where she reveals the origins of her ideas for characters and stories. But wherever she is and whatever she is doing, we witness her dedication to writing. Jacqueline's writing tip is, 'enjoy writing – it's meant to be fun!'

Programme 1: **My Life**

Jacqueline's home

In this first programme we are invited into Jacqueline's home. She gives a quick guided tour and we see for ourselves her huge collection of books in every room – and her toys; the most well known of which is Radish, a tiny rabbit that is Jacqueline's mascot. She holds it in her left hand as she writes and takes it with her when she visits schools. At the top of the stairs she has a large cardboard cutout of Freddie Mercury, once the lead singer from the band Queen, whom she has enjoyed listening to since the 1970s.

Despite having a study, Jacqueline settles down to write wherever she feels most comfortable and often likes to listen to music to put her in the mood, (though not Queen, because she likes to sing along to them!). She tries to write a little each day to keep in touch and to stop herself worrying about it. She uses hardbound books in which she records ideas and writes stories in longhand, before typing them up on the computer.

Jacqueline's childhood

As Jacqueline leafs through her photograph album she tells us about her childhood; where she lived and where she went to school. She recalls her early success working for DC Thompson, the publishers of magazines and comics, who named the teenage magazine *Jackie* after her! She takes us to visit the block of flats in which she spent most of her childhood and her primary and secondary schools. She reveals herself to have been a child who enjoyed her own company and created imaginary worlds from an early age. Her extraordinary talent is countered by an apparently ordinary lifestyle. This 'ordinariness' will help dispel any myths that children may have about what kind of person a writer is. Even a prolific writer, such as Jacqueline Wilson, is just as happy writing on a bus as in her study!

Jacqueline's success

Jacqueline acknowledges and embraces her success as a writer, but she still finds it hard to believe, especially when she sees her books prominently displayed in a bookshop. Her feelings of pride and amazement are echoed by the voice of Freddie Mercury: 'Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?' The songs of Queen punctuate this programme – carefully chosen lyrics are used to

echo the excitement and pleasures in Jacqueline's life. Her daily routine involves swimming as well as writing, and her idea of relaxation is line dancing!

Activities

Before viewing

Ask children to jot down everything that they already know about Jacqueline Wilson or what they think she will be like in terms of appearance, where she lives, family, and so on. Use this as a basis for discussion after viewing.

After viewing

Discuss the children's response to the person Jacqueline Wilson: did the programme reveal anything about her that surprised or puzzled them? Ask them to build up a character study of her, including appearance, hobbies, friends and so on. Can they incorporate her character into a story, and what part would she play?

Brainstorm the information that children remember about Jacqueline Wilson from the programme and encourage them to use the Internet to find out more. A useful site is www.4learning.co.uk/bookbox. The children could use the information to compile a biography of her life.

Programme 2: **How I Write**

Characters

Jacqueline thinks her characters are made more convincing for the reader because she uses a strong narrative created in the first person. Jacqueline says that to write her characters, she needs to get inside their heads, to experience what it's like to be a child in a modern city, so she prefers to write in the first person, pretending that she is the character.

When asked why she doesn't write about children in conventional family settings, Jacqueline replies that she is interested in non-standard families and in children who have a few problems and have to work things out for themselves. Jacqueline explains that she often gives her characters a hard time, like Rose and Dad in *Double Act*, in order to build up the tension between other characters in the story and for the reader. Jacqueline doesn't believe in completely happy endings, so she doesn't solve all her

characters' problems for them. She tries to leave her stories on a positive note however, at a point where her characters have come through the worst of a bad patch.

Themes

In setting out to depict what is going on in children's lives today, Jacqueline's stories reflect a range of social issues. Her books expose and confront serious issues, such as the death of a child in *Vicky Angel* or mental illness in *The Illustrated Mum*. Jacqueline feels that these are difficult and worrying subjects which exist in children's real lives and that children therefore need the opportunity to explore them. She treats these themes truthfully but with sensitivity and care.

Research

Jacqueline admits that she doesn't do any formal research for her stories. Details for her characters and plots may come from everyday incidents, things she has read, or just things that interest or fascinate her. For example, the programme shows Jacqueline watching a tattoo artist, a theme that comes up in the descriptions in *The Illustrated Mum*.

Children may be particularly interested in Jacqueline's attitude to planning her stories. She says that she doesn't plan them; she thinks planning is boring! Jacqueline has lots of ideas in her head and although she keeps an 'ideas' book just in case, she believes that her best ideas are never forgotten. Perhaps what children will learn from this is that all writers develop their own way of working and that they, too, must develop what works best for them. Jacqueline describes her writing process as: having an idea; thinking it through; getting started (the hardest bit); knowing what will happen in the next chapter; waiting for other ideas to 'pop up', as they invariably do.

Illustration

Many of the books Jacqueline enjoyed as a child contained small black and white drawings and she wanted to include this as a feature of her books, to make the text more accessible for less experienced readers. We meet Nick Sharratt, Jacqueline's illustrator. His expressive style of drawing is exactly the style that Jacqueline would want to draw in herself. In her manuscript she writes notes for Nick describing what the character is wearing and what she wants them to be doing or saying because she thinks that the illustrations have an important role in telling the whole story.

Publishing

Jacqueline writes very secretively in the early stages of a book. We see her meeting her editors in order to revise the text until all are satisfied with the final manuscript. She describes the lengthy process from idea to publication:

- Idea
- Write story in longhand
- Type story onto computer
- Make changes
- Send to publisher
- Meet the editor who makes suggestions to improve story
- Re-work manuscript
- Editor and writer decide when story is finished
- Manuscript sent to the printers

Activities

Before viewing

Ask children which parts of the writing process are most difficult for them. Can they give each other tips to get through it?

After viewing

Encourage children to write in the style of Jacqueline Wilson. Encourage them to watch children around them and on the media and select a child who catches their attention. How can they get inside that person's head and what words will come out as they begin to write?

Design a class/school survey of Jacqueline Wilson's readership. What do you notice? Are there certain age groups of boys or girls that go for her books? What do children enjoy most about her stories?

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English for 7–11 year olds



Book Box: Popular Writers

What's So Good About ... Jacqueline Wilson?



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Leaflet written by **Liz George**
Edited by **Adrienne Jones**
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