

I'm going to share with you an incident from the original Bicycle Adventure that inspired one of the scenes in *Code Name Verity*. This comes straight from a journal that I kept in 1992, when I was living in Oxford, England, doing fieldwork for my PhD. The friend I went biking with is also named Elizabeth – just for reference, so that you know I'm not talking to myself!

This is excerpted from my journal just as I wrote it.

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*It was a fateful decision to join the road, as it was the first step toward complete abandonment of our original plan—i.e, cycle on the Thames towpath to Dorchester for morning coffee. We found an excellent abandoned moss-covered sliver of road, complete with a little stone-arched bridge, which led to a little village called Culham. We stopped at a pub called The Lion, a nondescript but pleasant 1950's style pub, inhabited by a single middle-aged couple playing cribbage with the pub cribbage board. We had our coffee and after asking the locals for advice about returning to the towpath (they advised not to) and after leaving our map in the pub (mine host came out with it telling us we weren't going to get very far without our map, were we?) we set off, only to discover that my front tire was completely flat.*

*This was highly ironic because in order to get on that sliver of road mentioned above we'd had to lift our bikes over a barbed wire fence. We'd joked at the time about what I'd tell them at the bike rental shop: "How'd you get this puncture?" "On a barbed wire fence." Well, Elizabeth's pump (a new one) didn't fit, of course, but she wanted to try it—got me to hold both bikes while she fiddled with the pump and of course they both fell over, bringing me with them sandwiched between bicycles.*

*We picked ourselves up and limped back to The Lion to ask for a bucket of water or a petrol station. They gave us the water and we set about mending the tire with Elizabeth's German repair kit. Naturally we didn't have the right tools, but the landlord sent us an angel in the form of a young local, who produced 1) tools 2) another pump that didn't work. He got the tire off the inner tube using my nail file. We patched the tire and ate our lunch while we*

*waited for the patch to dry and for the angel to cycle off toward Dorchester looking for the right kind of pump. He came back saying that he could get the tire pumped up but he'd have to take it away to do it, and cycled off carrying the wheel, while we ate the cookies from our packed lunch.*

*After we'd got the bike back together we figured it was drink time, and that we could thank the Angel by buying him a drink.*

*I said: "Can we buy you a drink?"*

*He answered: "Don't be silly."*

*Elizabeth said: "Well, we need one."*

*So we did (in the Lion)—and had a nice chat with the landlord and the Angel, whose sister lives in Maine.*

*Onward, thinking we might make it to Dorchester in time for lunch. At 10 of 2 we stopped in Long Wittenham at The Plough because we weren't going to make it to Dorchester. Fortified, we decided not to take the train back (since we'd missed it). We decided to try to cycle straight up the old Roman road to Alchester (which really doesn't exist any more—the road, I mean—Alchester doesn't exist any more either, though). Of course it started raining. In Berinsfield—a housing estate north of Dorchester—Elizabeth discovered that her front tire was completely flat.*

*Having learned from experience, this time we were able to change it ourselves!*

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End of story: Friends make sensational teams. But help from angels is always welcome.

People ask me if I see myself in any of the *Code Name Verity* characters, and although my answer is "No, these characters are invented" – yet my writing and the narrator Julie's writing of this manuscript have a lot in common. Julie was born to be a novelist. I didn't know that when I started out writing for her, but it became obvious very early on. She *knows* this is her only chance to produce something worth reading, and that's what drives her. Like

me, she plays with every literary device available to her. And like me, she's writing because it transports her somewhere else – in her own words, “indulging myself in details as if they were wool blankets or alcohol, escaping wholly back into the fire-and-water-filled early days of our friendship. We made a *sensational* team.” I was thinking of friendships of my own when I wrote this, reconfiguring adventures and pleasures that I shared with my own friends – now far away – celebrating that feeling like falling in love.

Julie also writes because there's power in it. In Ormaie, Julie has been stripped of all power *except* words, but words are her weapon of choice – even over feminine wiles. There is a lot of reading between the lines that you can bring to this book, and one thing I think isn't obvious is that during those three undescribed days when Julie is left tied to a chair with an iron rail strapped against her spine, the thing that keeps her going is making up the eleven sets of code she's planning to bargain with: choosing the poems, applying the appropriate code to set passages within the poems, getting it all ready in her head. It's a very, very similar thing to what goes on in Shorty's head when he finds himself dying of thirst, injured and buried alive beneath the rubble of the hospital in Nick Lake's *In Darkness*. It's like Taylor Jane's coping strategies in Beverley Brenna's *The White Bicycle*; in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz, Ari discovers the powers of words. “All men are writers,” says Charlie in Terry Pratchett's *Dodger*. Don't we all do this, in times of fear or stress or boredom: cling to what we love and make up stories?

This is something I've thought a lot about recently, the incredible power of simple words to transport you. When you're reading about a convincing viewpoint character, you are there inside that character's head. It can be as true for the reader as for the author. It's something Maddie, *Code Name Verity*'s other narrator, comments on – she means it as truth in life, but it works as truth in fiction as well:

“This, even more wonderful and mysterious, is also true: when I read it, when I read what Julie's written, she is instantly alive, whole and undamaged. *With her words in my mind while I'm reading, she is as real as I am.*”

When you're reading Julie's narrative, she is writing it. You're not reading it in retrospect. You're reading it as it happens, in real

time. And that's how I wrote it, too. Convention dictates that we talk about narrative in the present tense, even when a book is written in the past tense or when we know the characters in it are already dead. Julie writes in the present tense: she's eternally writing.

I know that *Code Name Verity* is a book that makes people cry, and however much any of my readers, teen and adult, have wept over it, I promise you that I have shed several boatloads more tears over Maddie and Julie than anyone else. It does not come as a surprise to me that this book makes people cry. But it did come as a surprise to realize that it also makes people laugh. Julie's sarcasm, her tantrums, her sense of self-parody and her flares of defiance are *funny*. I did not intend this and I love it. It makes me feel that she exists as a character outside of myself – that readers see traits in her that I missed. Part of the power of words is related to the author putting them on the page and then letting the reader do what he or she will with them.

I love the paradox of the power of words: how they can be wielded, like all dangerous tools, for good or ill. My children only recently discovered that a crowbar isn't a weapon. A blade can lance a wound or cut an artery. A review can make or break a book. A valedictory speech signifies the end of an era and the beginning of a new life. Fiction is a lie that tells the truth.

*Code Name Verity* is a war story and a story about friendship, but it is also about *writing*. It is a story about the power of words, about saying what you mean and not saying what you mean, about remaining steadfast through subterfuge. Julie passes messages on to Georgia Penn by talking in metaphors. Engel writes her messages in invisible ink. Maddie, keeping a journal for the first time, creates figures of speech based around what she knows: engines, flight, navigation. It's a story about voices being silenced, and about people finding their own voice for the first time.

Words, both spoken and written, are as sustaining or destructive as spells. Faced with death at the guillotine, Julie and Marie give each other strength by exchanging the most precious words they have: they give each other their names.

On behalf of myself, my wonderful agent Ginger Clark and my tremendous editors—Catherine Onder and the entire team at

Disney Hyperion; Stella Paskins at Egmont in the United Kingdom and Amy Black at Doubleday in Canada—thank you. Thank you, Printz Committee, and YALSA, and the American Library Association—for giving *Code Name Verity* this powerful, evocative name: Printz Honor Book.