

**Polly Atwell ('00)** visited campus in September for a campus-wide discussion of her first novel, *Wild Girls*, this year's Common Reading. She also met with Professor Julie Pfeiffer and four members of the first year class (Taylor Humin, Angie Crews, Diana Foronda, and Moira Bailey) for a more intimate conversation.

**Julie:** I'm really glad we're all here this morning. Maybe you could start, Polly, by talking about what it was like for you in your first week or two at Hollins?

**Polly:** I remember it being kind of bewildering. I guess what stands out for me is meeting people in the first couple of weeks, people who became my best friends, people who I know now through the alumna network, and of course you don't know that these people are going to be important to you, but just because of the intimacy of Hollins you get to start forging those relationships right away. And, so, it was a good time and an exciting time but, I think, a little terrifying. It has to be for everybody, right?

**Taylor:** I'm just surprised how close everyone has gotten so quickly. It's crazy to think that we've only been here for a matter of days, that we can, like, count, but already we're all starting to get used to living with each other and being close all the time. It's weird to think that people who are suddenly becoming our new friends are going to be in our lives for the next four years and probably far beyond.

**Polly:** Absolutely, probably the best friends you'll make and it's funny to think about now, when you're just at the beginning.

**Julie:** Taylor, you said something in discussion a week ago about Kate being in a liminal space that felt relevant to your experience this summer.

**Taylor:** I appreciated reading this book when I read it because I could definitely relate to Kate feeling really, really nervous about the future and about having to make a big leap of change in her life. She desires throughout the novel to leave Swan River, but when her leaving comes closer and closer she starts feeling very, very restless and I think that was a really strong feeling this summer. I was waiting for when I could start setting things on fire. "Do I feel restless enough yet? Is it time to start torching things?" But I definitely could relate to what Kate was feeling about being nervous while also being excited and not really being sure how to balance that out.

**Polly:** When my agent was shopping the book around, the reason I chose the editor I did at Scribner was when I talked to her she said "I really see this as a feminist allegory." I said "me too, that's great." And to me, it is. It's all about choice and having circumstances force on you some choices that are not positive and some that will take you in a positive direction and being able to make that decision for yourself.

**Julie:** Let me follow up with a quote that several students wrote about in their essays. It's the very last sentence of the novel and Kate is speaking: "The wild girl is with me always; she is

my rage and my hunger, and if I live what passes for a decent life in this world it is because I know to say no to the thing inside me that yearns, even now, to burn it all down.” What I’d be interested in hearing more about is how each of you responded to that sense of anger; did you feel that Kate was angry?

**Moira:** I’m not sure Kate was... I’m not sure I ever thought of Kate as angry. I thought of her as afraid mostly.

**Angie:** Yeah. I agree with that.

**Moira:** But there are theories that certain fears lead to anger.

**Julie:** Like what kind of fears?

**Moira:** Fear of upsetting someone, fear of failure, of not being accepted.

**Angie:** Yeah. I definitely agree with the fact that I never really saw Kate as having any kind of anger inside of her. At least to the extent that the other girls did. You could actively see Willow lashing out against her parents and I would describe Willow as being angry. But I would not describe Kate as being angry. Because, like Moira said, she just seemed like she was scared. She was scared of this thing that she had inside of her, this burning and all that stuff and I feel like, because she was afraid of the unknown, she never really wanted to tap into that. She was like “I don’t want to; I don’t know if I’m going to react the same way my sister did and just kinds of run away on fire,” not hurt anyone, maybe like accidentally burn down something, but that was the lesser extent of being a wild girl. She wasn’t sure where on the spectrum she would fall, I’m going to burn everyone and everything or if she was going to do nothing. So she decides to kind of bottle that up because of the fear. At least, that’s what I got from it.

**Julie:** I think that’s really interesting.

**Diana:** I agree both that she is afraid of becoming who she is and that she’s not really angry. She’s just a scared little freshman at the beginning. Then, as a senior at the Academy, and a seventeen year old girl who’s becoming eighteen, she is really trying to find her way towards becoming a controlled woman. To me, the wild girls are uncontrolled – they are crazy. Kate just keeps it to herself, whether it’s whatever she thinks about Tessa, how much she hates her, Willow, how much she doesn’t like her that much, she just keeps it to herself. Everything is from Kate’s point of view and really, Kate is just holding it in and then at the end it just explodes.

**Angie:** That makes me think about the fact that the wild girls were always only girls. It’s like when you are younger, a girl, not really an adult, you don’t have that ability to cover it up or hold it inside. So it is interesting they actually had the ability to lash out as girls because it’s not like you were ever going to see a wild adult, a wild woman. It was only ever going to be a wild girl because they still hadn’t reached that point where they could control it.

**Polly:** And to me one of the most important lines in the book Caroline says, you know, “powerlessness is the thing about being a girl.” I mean, that’s sort of defining feature and that for the wild girls to sort of invert that and suddenly have all the power was, it was a scary situation for everyone around them, but I think even for them. And when you see Kate’s fear I think that’s what that is. You know, “I don’t know what to do with this power and ultimately it’s going to come out in destructive way because I don’t know how to control it.”

**Julie:** What a great line... in the books I write about often girls do have power, a kind of power. Think of *Anne of Green Gables*, for example. She has this power to influence the people around her just through her personality, her force of will. But part of what she and other literary girls like her have to learn is to not expect to have that kind of power over people, to pull it all inward.

But some of what gives these girls power is their naiveté, their being wide open, which is a phrase I’d never heard until I moved to the South. I think you could make the argument that for girls, adolescence is about learning not to expect too much. I know when we talk about *Little Women* in my class one of the readings of that novel is that, yeah, it’s a *Bildungsroman* but a *Bildungsroman* for girls is about accepting that your dreams are not going to come true.

**Polly:** Yeah.

**Julie:** So I’m just curious how that fits with what’s happening here because it seems different. I think you’re taking that literary history and moving it to a different track, but I’m curious what you think about it.

**Polly:** Well, for me, the thing that’s so appealing about *Anne of Green Gables* or *Jo March* is they’re almost more like children, I think, because they do have that sort of ability to take the world in a completely fresh way. And to me, by the time the girls get to this book, they’ve lost that and become so self-conscious that they can’t influence people around them because they won’t even allow themselves to have that power.

**Julie:** Right. Right.

**Polly:** But I think there are characters like Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* who do have power, but it’s maybe always a little bit subversive and it’s because it works under the surface of the society that it works at all. Does that make sense?

**Julie:** Yes. Well, and what about adult women in this? Kate’s mother has this moment where you sort of see that she’s trying to start over, that she’s trying to exert her autonomy but as Kate looks around there aren’t necessarily role models for her.

**Polly:** Yeah. I think that’s true in the way that a novel is always kind of a limited world and a little bit unrealistic. I mean, there would be women teachers or women she knew that maybe she could say “ok I want to be like that” but she’s living in this world of girls where her only real role models are her mother and Maggie and they’re both women who have gotten stuck. And even if Maggie’s a little happy being stuck that’s not something she can aspire to.

**Julie:** Well, and Mason's mother, Ms. Lemons, there's a moment where you think she almost could be a role model, but then she so completely disintegrates. You could see why Kate would maybe be afraid to grow up.

**Polly:** If these are the options, yes, and I think that's why she has to escape this community. And for whatever reason, she knows there are other options out there. She just has to get to them.

**Diana:** I kind of want to know what inspired you to do this novel. I mean, was it Hollins? [Laughter] Both the Academy and Hollins are women's schools and yet I don't see any fire or burning places on campus yet.

**Polly:** You know, when I was writing I was really afraid of that because the landscape is very much like Hollins, which I love. And I thought "oh, I hope that nobody thinks I'm saying all these terrible things about Hollins."

**Angie:** That's what I was thinking. I was like "is this supposed to be Hollins? Is this a reflection of Hollins? I'm a little afraid."

**Polly:** I'm here to tell you it's not like that. I'd gone to boarding school before I came to Hollins and even though the landscape ended being more based on this place, my experience of being at boarding school and just being so tightly isolated with the same people for years really did lead into the book to a certain extent. Because I think close, wonderful relationships can form in that type of environment but it can also be a very bad thing if you get the wrong personalities together. So I actually tried writing about it in a realistic way about girls at a boarding school and it didn't really work. It was when I had this idea of exaggerating their power, giving them the ability to do things that we would never expect in the real world that it kind of clicked as a story and then I got to write about female empowerment in a way that was interesting to me. Some of my good friends from Hollins came down this weekend and they had all read the book and they kept saying "you're so dark, I never knew you were so dark," and I don't really see it that way. I just felt like it was a good story to tell.

**Julie:** When I read the blurb on the back of the book I thought "oh dear, I'm not going to like this." But it turns out to be dark without being gory. Maybe because of the allegory, I'm not in the woods feeling the fear of these girls' victims. Maybe because we enter this story through Kate and she's writing about these events after the fact, there is a sense of control. Kate's telling us something about her past that helps us understand what it's like to be an adolescent girl in this society. But there's that little bit of detachment through the first-person narrator who has survived this experience. I appreciated that.

**Polly:** I'm glad you felt that way. To me, I wanted the fantasy and the darkness to be really subordinated to her journey into the characters. A question I get a lot is, "do you want to write more fantasy?" I really don't think I will. To me the allegory was what was interesting here.

**Julie:** Well, I can't resist the temptation to ask you how *Jane Eyre* influenced you as you wrote this novel.

**Polly:** That's a wonderful question. I love *Jane Eyre* and I think the thing I love most about her is her prickliness. When I reread that book, I was aware of how -- angry would be one word for it --how oppositional she is with the world she lives in. I think more of that probably ended up in Caroline, but it's an impulse that Kate definitely feels, just that something is wrong here and in the circumstances that I'm in there's no way for me to change it and I think Jane's in the same situation. Her, you know, one of my favorite parts in the book is when she ends up with Rivers, but when she's running across the moors her only escape is to go out into the wilderness because there is no place for her in the society.

**Julie:** I wonder about Willow as a Bertha figure.

**Polly:** That's interesting.

**Maira:** I haven't read *Jane Eyre* but isn't Bertha the woman who is locked up in the attic?

**Polly:** the madwoman

**Julie:** and she sets the house on fire and, well, I don't want to give it away. Put that on your reading list.

**Polly:** Yeah. I think Willow is kind of an alter ego for Kate in the same way that we always read the madwoman now.

**Julie:** Interesting. And I noticed particularly in the narrative that tone. You know, Jane is able to describe some pretty horrific events from that detached place of "I'm just telling you a story." So we're kind of inside the intensity and outside at the same time and I think Kate's narrative does the same thing.

**Polly:** That's really interesting. And to me gothic fiction that has a more histrionic tone is a lot less appealing. I mean like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or something awful like that. You know, it's when can we treat very dramatic, even upsetting, events with a little bit of observational distance I think they become most interesting and most dramatic for me.

**Julie:** We're out of time now.

**Polly:** Thank you guys so much. You were fantastic, such great questions.