

# War in Young Adult Literature: An Interview with Jen Bryant

by Shanetia P. Clark and Matthew G. Skillen

From ancient conflicts to the United States' current involvement in the war in Afghanistan, literature, especially young adult literature, has put a human face on both the glories and horrors of war. The work of Jen Bryant provides a captivating lens through which young adult literature enthusiasts can better understand current and historical conflicts so they become more than just facts, dates, and figures.

Spend time with Jen Bryant, and one immediately is impressed with and awestruck by her insatiable appetite for history, poetry, and great storytelling. Her books, *Kaleidoscope Eyes* (2009) and *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro* (2010), put a human face on war from those on the front lines and those left at home.

Jen Bryant is drawn to robust moments in history. While reading the stories, viewing the artifacts, and becoming immersed in historical documents, she gravitates toward figures whose stories may not be known. For example, a line in a history book about World War II served as the catalyst for *Music for the End of Time* (2005), a picture book. For her books *Kaleidoscope Eyes* and *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro*, she returned to her own personal history. Bryant describes what galvanized these two stories and what she hopes they reveal for her readers.

**Jen Bryant:** [*Kaleidoscope Eyes*] is in such a specific time and place, the summer of 1968, and for me it was a very scary time. I was eight years old in 1968, but I do remember the news reports on the television, which were major. I can remember knowing people who had sons, brothers, husbands who went over [to Vietnam]. I remember the sense of the world falling apart, you know, just that there was this thing that I didn't quite understand as a kid. So, I had written some poems about that for adult literary magazines, which is how a lot my books end up

coming about. [They] catalyze a group of memories. So, it isn't so much that I choose to write about war. It is just that I think war itself tends to set other things in motion. And it always affects something so social and political and also economic. [It] affects ordinary individual people, always.

Well, *Kaleidoscope Eyes* was really, it was a collision of three things that I was reading about at the time and sort of researching. As I already mentioned, I was able to draw from my personal memories because I grew up in the Sixties. I was a young child, but I had a lot of memories of that specifically. But, I was also reading books on the Sixties. You know those *Life Magazine* books? I was looking at a lot of photographs, wonderful photographs, which often tell a lot about the conflict and the social unrest: the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement, the peace movement, the Vietnam War, assassinations, the whole sense of uncertainty and angst around those events and time periods.

I was listening to Beatles music and reading their lyrics again. At the same time I was also reading a really good biography about Captain Kidd, called *The Pirate Hunter*, and I was just fascinated with that. And this was after the *Pirates of the Caribbean*; the three movies had come out, so I learned an awful lot about pirate life. They were kind of these floating democracies. And, I didn't have an appreciation for that really. I also learned that Captain Kidd didn't set out to be a pirate. And when he tried to go back to his regular life, which was being a ship's captain and a businessman, he buried treasure up the East Coast so that the Navy wouldn't get it, because he had worked hard for that treasure when he was a pirate. So, I thought that was interesting.

I was also reading about Mississippi steam ships, how they would come down the

Mississippi River and they would hit a submerged tree and then sink with all of their cargo. These things were not in any way related. But, in some strange way I wanted to use all three of them in a story. And, so *Kaleidoscope Eyes*, I have to say, turned into a wild cooking experiment. Like where you would throw three in ingredients that wouldn't seem to go well together, and mix them up and see if it works. And it doesn't always work, but that time it did. So, I had a little bit of luck there.

*As Kaleidoscope Eyes fused elements of biography, history, and music together in a dynamic way, Bryant crafted together poems she had written with a story that had been living with her since childhood. Here, Bryant describes her inspiration for The Fortune of Carmen Navarro, which is inspired by the novella and opera Carmen.*

**Jen Bryant:** [The opera *Carmen*] has been in my head. Every once in a while, it comes to the forefront and I ask myself, what could I do with this? I have a habit of writing poems about historical figures, particularly artists. Let's just say Picasso, let's say a poet like Walt Whitman, or something. And I try to put them into a contemporary setting. What would they do? I could create contemporary characters that would mirror the original historical characters in *Carmen* – the soldier, the gypsy, and their friends. So at that point, I didn't know that there would be four narrators. I didn't know anything about the structure. I just thought it would be in present day. Because setting is really important to me, I needed to set it in a place that I knew well. Then, it dawned on me—the Valley Forge Military Academy. That would be okay, if I am telling this tale for young people [because] that might be where you would find a young soldier.

So, since it was contemporary, as I developed Ryan's character, I thought I want to stay with the original idea that he forsakes his dutiful life. In order to have a dutiful life and to even create more pressure on him to stick with that, as opposed to throwing it away, I would then give him a brother in Iraq and a father who had a great military history and was from the school and all of that. It was a lot of fun actually.

The Fortune of Carmen Navarro *is told from the perspective of four narrators. Bryant expands upon her reason for this story-telling technique.*

**Jen Bryant:** I really enjoyed multiple narrators in *Ringside 1925* (2008). And, after I finished that book, it was hard to do that book because there were nine narrators. And, I wanted each to have a distinctive look on the page and also a distinctive voice. But, to keep all of those threads going was a challenge. I would use a lot of colored sticky notes to show myself visually who had spoken when. So, at the end of that I knew I liked that, but I wanted fewer of them. So, I was eager to try that again. And, this story, I had the two main characters' voices in my head, Carmen and Ryan. I know in the original story they each have a confidant, a friend. They are minor roles, but I brought those friends forward so that they would have almost an equal role in the story. And that was fun because I got to create that more. You know they aren't so fleshed out in the original story or the opera, but in my book it was fun. So I got to use the Frankenstein effect.

*In Carmen, Ryan's family is steeped in the military. All of the men in his family served gallantly. Ryan's brother is a soldier, serving on the front line of the war in Iraq. His presence provides a first-hand, realistic view of the war. Bryant explains how she tells this part of the story through Ryan's brother.*

**Jen Bryant:** I went online and actually read some letters from Iraq. At this point there were some letters being shown on newscasts. And, I also knew someone who was over there, not in a frontline position, but in one of the safety zones. I love inserting letters into the story. All of my novels do that. It's a visual change; it allows for another voice to come into the story in a strong way, but only once in awhile.

So, I thought, instead of having Ryan sort of secondhand tell us what is going on with his brother, it's better that you hear it directly from his brother. And a letter was a way to do that, simply because the time it was set in, which is contemporary time, but also 2007. It was interesting to think about how to date the letters

and what year to set the story in. I kind of had to because so much was happening with the Presidential election that I didn't want to deal with that also. Even though I was really excited about it myself, I thought that was too much and it would really intrude on the story. So I made it kind of the beginning. I knew that in reality, they would be talking about the Presidential election, because that was all tied up with the Iraq War, the whole reason we were supposedly there, and all of that. So, that is why it is 2007 and not 2008, 2009, or 2010.

*In Kaleidoscope Eyes, the presence of war is much more at the forefront than it is in The Fortune of Carmen Navarro. For example, in Kaleidoscope Eyes, Lisa and her friends seem to be more aware of the war versus the friends in Carmen. Bryant explains how the differences were crafted purposefully.*

**Jen Bryant:** In *Kaleidoscope Eyes*, Malcolm's brother goes off to war, so that was very personal. Here is a guy that they are used to seeing every day in their neighborhood. You know, he graduated high school with a sister, works at a lumberyard. Then there is Harry, who isn't overseas, but [Liza] doesn't find out why until later, because all of the other young men are gone. I remember that as a distinct memory of having to sign up for the draft and trying to figure out for myself as a young kid. What is the draft? What happens when you are drafted? I actually went back and did a lot of research about the draft. What would exempt you from it? What would be the reasons, physically, that you might not be accepted? And then, when did it start? It really expanded quite a bit. It was such a bloodbath over there.

There were visual signs in a small town too. You would see the daily newspaper [and] the young man in a wheelchair on the porch. I remember seeing a few young men who came back [and] who had changed physically, mentally, or both and, seeing stories on television about that. So it was just a distinct memory. I could draw on some of my own personal memories for that. And, you know, there is a whole lot written about the Vietnam War and there are so many parallels. It was an unpopular

war, people weren't really sure what was going on there, a lot of people were convinced that we shouldn't even be there, and it is the same with Iraq. Although there is a lot of support for the military, because of what they do and the sacrifices that they made.

There's also the whole ambiguity of, why we are there in the first place? There really weren't any weapons of mass destruction, and the whole ambiguity about the purpose, and the effectiveness of what we are doing over there. And that creates such a terrible personal conflict, I think, for all of us. To know that here are these people who are putting their lives on the line every single day on our behalf, and yet, to not really either grasp, understand, or support the purpose in an abstract, ideal way of why the war is even going on. Yeah, there are just questions, so many questions. That is what good stories are built around, the tension of that.

So, it was purposeful that the Vietnam War has much more effect on those kids in that town, than the Iraq War does, except in one place in *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro* when Ryan's brother writes to him and says, "Hey, you know, a guy got his arm blown off." It then becomes real, more real for Ryan and adds further fuel to his fire that "Geez, maybe I don't want my life to go there." Because I think it would be hard, if you are not right in the situation and you are not seeing things happen, to really grasp. It is the difference between watching something on television and being there and experiencing it.

*Young adult literature, in particular Jen Bryant's work, helps us to better understand current and historical conflicts so they become more than just facts, dates, and figures to be memorized for a test. As we explored these two novels, we wondered how she viewed her works within this context.*

**Jen Bryant:** My father was a history major and I know anytime he would talk about it when I was a kid my eyes would kind of glaze over, because you're a kid and you don't want to be taught anything by your parents. But, whenever he would tell a personal story, or whenever I had the opportunity to read something personal, and usually through biography, or to watch a movie

or a documentary, when it became personal I realized even though a lot of these things were happening in the past, the uniforms, the setting, the culture, the style, all of that may be different now, but human nature doesn't really change, for instance, things like celebrity worship, ethnic profiling. Media hype surrounded the Lindbergh baby kidnapping. You can say that about trials that happen today. The media does affect the justice system. Celebrities do have a different standard of behavior than the rest of us do. Ethnic profiling continues.

Over time I feel like looking in the past is looking at a fixed time and place and events. But, in a larger sense it is really looking at human nature through a safer lens because it isn't us, it isn't now; it's in the past. But you always get those, at least I do, I get those "ah ha" moments when I am doing the research. Like, oh gee, so much that happened to my three fictional characters in *Kaleidoscope Eyes* is happening to kids today. Same thing. We still have an unpopular war. Everybody still knows someone who is over there or who has been involved. And, people feel a lot ambiguity about that. There are still families that are split up. And that, through history, has been a difficult thing. And, people deal with that in different ways.

Heck, we had a trial here in 2005 in Pennsylvania that really mirrored the Scopes trial in 1925. 1925 to 2005? That's an enormous difference. And, yet, those issues are still hot. They really are hot. What that shows you is that people's beliefs really drive their behavior. And people's beliefs are very important and personal to them. And yet they are also political. So, everything is connected, and I think that if I had to sum it up, I would say that the fact that everything is connected in human nature, the personal, the political, the economic, all of that. We tend to separate things when we talk about them. But, it is not really separate. Just like history isn't really separate from the present, which really isn't separate from the future. Not really, not really when you talk about human beings.

### Conclusion

Indeed, when one's perspective is broadened ever so slightly, the connectedness between

people, places, and significant events seems immediately apparent. Try as we might to compartmentalize every aspect of our lives, in end, through the stories and experiences every person shares, we are bound together by these common fibers. Author Jen Bryant captures the memorable moments and emotions from her experiences as a young person growing up during a tumultuous time in America's brief history. Now, as America once again finds itself in a period of trepidation, these images of the author's past serve as lasting illustrations in the ongoing discussion about America's present and the outlook for America's future.

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Note: For more information about Jen Bryant and her books, please visit her website at <http://www.jenbryant.com>.

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**Shanetia P. Clark**, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of education at Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg. She is also the Site-Director of the Capital Area Writing Project, a regional site of the National Writing Project. Dr. Clark teaches courses in adolescent literacy, secondary English methods, and writing pedagogy. She may be reached at [spc170@psu.edu](mailto:spc170@psu.edu).

**Matthew G. Skillen**, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English and the Director of Secondary English Education at Elizabethtown College. He is also a Teacher Consultant for the Capital Area Writing Project in Harrisburg, PA. He may be reached at [skillenm@etown.edu](mailto:skillenm@etown.edu).