

McCarthy and More:

A Conversation with Trudy Krisher

I met Trudy Krisher when she was signing books at the NCTE Annual Convention in Indianapolis in 2004. I was excited to meet this author whose book *Spite Fences*, winner of the International Reading Association book award for 1995, had so captured my students' attention and interested them in the Civil Rights Movement. When I approached Trudy, I felt an immediate connection; she was so warm and welcoming. This kind-hearted, highly intelligent, gifted writer readily answered my questions about *Spite Fences* and enthusiastically talked about the inspiration for her then-new book, *Uncommon Faith* (2003). Talking with Trudy left me upbeat and eager to see how her latest novel would resonate with my students. I felt honored that this award-winning author took such an interest in my approaches to teaching her novel. I could see that Trudy was not one who just cared about the quality of her writing as evidenced by awards and reviews; this author clearly cared about her writing in much more personal terms: how it touched students' lives and impacted their understanding. Since our meeting at NCTE in 2004, Trudy and I have corresponded via email. Also a teacher, Trudy would converse with me about teaching strategies, and she has always been interested to hear about the myriad of creative responses my students have had to her novels. Two particular examples come to mind: one from *Spite Fences*, the other from *Uncommon Faith*. In response to *Spite Fences*, one of my students, Kirsten Lutz, made 3-D Character heads for characters Maggie, Virgil, and Zeke. Kirsten then wrote and recorded a speech for each (see Figure 1). The speeches really got into the minds of the characters, sharply defining the

perspective and traits of each. I took photos of the 3-D heads and sent them, along with the speeches, to Trudy. She really liked what the student had done, noting in particular that the student's speech writing picked up on Trudy's own use of dialect and repetition. The student example from *Uncommon Faith* was an original piano composition played in the background to a monologue from the perspective of the book's protagonist, Faith Common. The piano composition and monologue, "Jewel in a Pig's Snout" (see Figure 2), were written by one of my students, Michael Rinaldi-Eichenberg. Michael had his mother read the lines for his tape recording so the voice would be a woman's. When I told my students that I had shared their work with the author and that she was very impressed, I could tell they felt really proud of themselves, and deservedly so. As those who invest their lives in English language arts and working with young people, we are fortunate to have authors like Trudy Krisher who genuinely care not only about telling great stories but about connecting with students and supporting the work of teachers.

In August 2006 I received an advance copy of Trudy Krisher's latest novel, *Fallout*. In the spirit of *Spite Fences* (1994), *Kinship* (1997), and *Uncommon Faith* (2003), Krisher's fourth YA novel also has historical underpinnings. *Fallout* (2006) offers insight into the McCarthy era of the 1950s while also including elements that will remind readers of Hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans and surrounding areas in 2005. In addition to asking Krisher about her new book, *Fallout*, in the interview that follows, I have taken the opportunity to look at her work

Student-created characters heads and speeches by Kirsten Lutz

Maggie's Speech



Mama says we're not white trash like that Virgil Boggs and his kind. She's right. We don't go 'round beatin' up coloreds, terrorizing little girls, or trying to rape someone like me. Yet, my friend Zeke says blacks and whites sweat alike under one sun so why do we drink from separate water fountains, not eat at the same table—why? We even have separate bathrooms!

Trouble sure rained down on Zeke beginning that day at Byer's Drugs . . . I'd been up in the big tree restin' and thinkin'. When the truck pulled up and spewed forth Virgil and his boys, I sat quiet. When they beat on Zeke until he seemed nigh upon dead, I sat frozen to my bones. Then they peed and did something else all over Zeke . . .

Zeke quit coming uptown much after that night, so I just set myself to finding him. I'd seen news stories about bus station sit-ins and church kneel-ins and even on a black man who KO'd a white man in boxing. I wanted to see how Zeke was and to ask him why coloreds seemed to be so fired up to pushing whites. I kept hearing Zeke's words that night under the Ghost Tree. He held his head proud-like and said, "Just wantin' my rights, is all. My rights and my people's."

What is civil rights, anyway?

Virgil's Speech



Who-ee! What a night! Me and the boys have set that old nigger, Zeke, straight! He'll be tuckin' tail and runnin' scared from now on. Guess he and that fancy lawyer thought a change was a-comin'. Gawd!

Our venerable KKK Grand Wizard says coloreds are the mongrels of the world . . . We don't let no canine dogs eat at our tables and drink from

our glasses, so why would we let nigger-dogs do it? Why, those colored folk should be glad we whites let them have their own public bathrooms, and we cleared out the back of the buses door them so they can get somewheres. Where in 'tarnation do they think they're going anyways? They're not fit for any work but what we give them.

Well, one thangs for sure, Zeke got our message tonight. He ain't gonna see, hear, or speak no evil against whites no more. That's one terrified nigger. He'll keep . . . out of whites' bathrooms and he'll sure 'nuf keep his gorilla trap shut. Yes, boys, we have struck a blow for our cause tonight.

Zeke's Speech



Student Kirsten Lutz with character heads she made from Styrofoam face mannequins. Kirsten arranged the character heads on a lazy-Susan and turned each toward the class while playing a tape recording of the corresponding character speech.

"Never be afraid of the truth," that's what I said to young Maggie that day she wanted to buy her daddy a birthday present with two nickels that weren't hers. Now, I'm fighting for my own brand of truth. It seems, most ways, I've been fighting for truth all my life. Sure, I'm afraid. Equal rights for my people is gonna be a hard road to travel. There will be worse things than beatings between now and the victory-time. It's wrong to treat any man different 'cause his skin is not the same color as another man's.

That Virgil Boggs and his white supremacy buddies believe they have silenced me. Their taunts and name-callings are kindling and their pummeling fists, stomp-kicking feet, and acrid urine all provide fuel to keep the desire for freedom burning within my soul. They have made this desire even stronger. No, Sir-ree! It's Virgil and his kind who are wrong, and I am more determined than ever to follow Dr. King's vision. Yes, we shall be free.

Figure 1. Character Heads and Speeches (From Linda J. Rice, *What Was It Like? Teaching History and Culture through Young Adult Literature*, Figure 7.6. New York: Teachers College Press, ©2006 by Teachers College, Columbia University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.)

Jewel in a Pig's Snout

Why am I mired in the 19th Century?
Just a young woman searching for equality
And how can I
Invoke one God
Ignore my talents
And remain invisible?
Sometimes I just want to explode

I'm tired of being ignored
I'm incensed and enraged
I don't want to practice
Discretion in a feminine cage

I'll not quietly mend your socks
Nor cook and clean all day
And if I get married
Don't expect a dutiful slave

I will learn calculus
and Greek and astronomy
And while I sew by the schoolhouse fire
I'll learn geometry

I don't want to become a product of my society
Pretending to be someone else entirely
I will be proud
To be a woman
I won't be an
Invisible subject
Sometimes I just want to break out

Just you wait Amos Read
Wait and you'll see
If you call me a jewel in a pig's snout
Then that's what I will be

Which I prefer to Lucy Putnam's ignorance
Each and every day
Because she accepts you and
Your society's backward ways

My subscription to sexism
Has long ago run out
And if that's the case
Then I'm a jewel in a pig's snout

When most women are both naïve and ignorant
I see society as a biblical confinement
I'm logical
Mathematical
Wanting nothing more
Than to be an equal
And I am proud to be a woman

Reading by Cecilia Rinaldi
Piano by Michael Rinaldi-Eichenberg

Figure 2. Monologue in Response to *Uncommon Faith*

collectively and explore some of the common threads that appear in all four of her young adult novels. In this way, this interview is intended to be more than a discussion of her latest novel; it is also intended to prompt readers to look at Krisher's earlier works and give insight into the author herself. I hope you enjoy the interview that follows with this master writer and teacher.

Interview with Trudy Krisher

Linda: Tell us about your new book, *Fallout*. What was the inspiration for it?

Trudy: I started *Fallout* about five years ago after having written a short story called "We Loved Lucy" for a Don Gallo short story collection. The inspiration for it was my belief that teenagers who question things—like Brenda Wompers, one of the heroines of the book—can have a difficult time in high school but that their presence is ultimately beneficial and necessary.

Fallout is set in the year 1954 and has a Cold War theme. Students can learn a lot about what the 50s were like—duck-and-cover drills, dreams about the supposed glories of atomic energy, changes brought about by the new interstate highway system, suburbia, and such. But the two most important historical events that happened in 1954 in terms of the novel were the McCarthy trials and the insertion of the words "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance.

The high school setting of *Fallout* is one which I hope teenagers can relate to. There are whispering campaigns, rumors, and gossip just like in the McCarthy trial, and one of the protagonists, an intellectual teenager named Brenda Wompers, stages a protest about the use of the words "under God" when she is expected to recite the pledge. All this takes place against a North Carolina backdrop of hurricanes. In 1954, North Carolina experienced three—of which Hurricane Hazel, which roars up at the climax of the book, was incredibly destructive.

Linda: You would have been working on *Fallout* when the Tsunami devastated southeast Asia and Hurricane Katrina slammed into the gulf states. What influence did that play in your writing about Hurricane Hazel?

Trudy: I was at NCTE at the ALAN conference in Indianapolis when *Uncommon Faith* came out, and I was working on *Fallout* then. I had even men-

tioned in my talk that I was looking at hurricanes and the year 1954 when there were three hurricanes in North Carolina. But also in 1954 was the year they added “under God” to the pledge. When I was at the conference in 2004, there’d been this Supreme Court case about this father out in California who was upset because his daughter had to say “under God” in the pledge. He brought a lawsuit and eventually lost, but it was a very big issue. So when the tsunami came and Katrina came and then there’s all this controversy about whether you should have the Ten Commandments in the courthouse and all that, I thought “oh,

I look so present, like I can see into the future.” But the fact is all those things happened as I was well into the book. The events were fortuitous, but they didn’t have that much to do with writing the book.

Linda: I notice that all four of your YA novels have historical settings. How did you choose those settings?

Trudy: I love history and the research that goes along with it. My father was a true Southern gentleman, passionate amateur historian, and student of the Civil War. Our family vacations were spent combing battlefields, and my mother kept a special pair of shoes in the car—she called them her “battlefield shoes”—for slogging through the muck. I chose the early 60s and the Civil Rights Movement for *Spite Fences* because it was a period familiar to me. My high school was integrated when I was 14, like Maggie Pugh, and I was well aware of the Jim Crow

prohibitions that kept blacks from the beaches and lunch counters.

Kinship is a companion piece to *Spite Fences* and set in a trailer park in the 1960s showing that part of life where people were on the move with their cars, with the trailers. It takes the story of Pert Wilson, Maggie’s friend, and looks at her life. It’s a story of community where I tried to develop the setting of the trailer park and show a warm and loving community. In the course of the story Pert longs for her father who abandoned the family when she was born. She has this idea that if only she had a father, everything would be fine. When he comes back to town she realizes that she has people in her life who are much more like family than her father is—that she has people who love her even though they are not blood relatives.

I chose the year 1837 for *Uncommon Faith* because it was a period that fascinated me. It was much like our own radical 1960s. The Jacksonian can-do spirit prompted people to believe all things were possible, and it was a great reforming period. Activists like the Grimke sisters, Dororthea Dix, and Julia Ward tried to address issues of mental health, provide services for the blind, open colleges to women, and address the problems of slavery. The issue of education for women found its way into the novel because Faith Common is bright and talented and curious, yet she is only expected to cook and sew, which she detests. I thought it would be fascinating to develop a spunky character who was denied an education. I was curious about what she might do; the novel is the result.

Fallout, the new novel, is set in 1954, during the McCarthy era, and the suspicion and rumor that characterized that period are reflected in the high school setting of the novel. The current challenges to proclamations of religion in public buildings and monuments and in challenges to school prayer actually began in 1954 when the words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance. So I am looking at the tension that arises over this religious-secular turmoil in the novel.

Linda: I notice that two of your novels deal with issues of religion and personal faith. Considering that schools and society today hear so much about the separation of church and state, do you ever feel

that you're going out on a limb addressing such issues?

Trudy: Believe it or not, I always feel like I'm going out on a limb. My books have dealt with women's rights, racism, intellectual freedom, and other topics. Religion is just one of them. As I've continued to write, I've continued to develop more courage about addressing difficult issues because the response from readers tells me that they are hungry for these kinds of conversations.

Linda: I also notice that each of your novels has a strong female protagonist. Was that deliberate on your part? In other words, are there particular messages you want to send to young women—or to men about women—in your writing?

Trudy: I think the use of women as characters is just natural because I am a female. However, in *Uncommon Faith* I purposefully focused on John Common, Faith's brother, to show that the conventions of the time worked against men as well as women. John is musical and is uninterested in the education and career path—that of a minister—expected of him. Like Faith, he suffers because his natural talents are thwarted by the society in which he lives. In general I'm never trying to teach a "message," but I am trying to answer questions. In *Spite Fences*, it's "How can we pull down the fences between the races and build more bridges?" In *Fallout*, it's "Who is my neighbor?" In *Kinship*, it's "How do we define 'family?'" Or at least some kind of approximation of these.

Linda: What else would you want to say about the religious content of your novels—or if particular characters are intended to represent and critique religious viewpoints or paradigms?

Trudy: My books really are all about the questions I wrestle with personally and that I believe others are wrestling with, too. As far as religion goes, I wouldn't say that there's religious content per se in my books; instead, I think the characters experience spiritual struggles. The determination to confront injustice—like racism or sexism—is essentially, in my view, a spiritual struggle, part of

an ethical and moral choice made—not always easily—by individuals.

Linda: How might your books help YAs to work through—or at least more seriously consider—some of these deeper, spiritual issues as they relate to their own lives?

Trudy: My most recent book, *Fallout*, addresses religious and spiritual questions most directly. As Genevieve Hardcastle is challenged to develop her own opinions about the Cold War, nuclear proliferation, and the atmosphere of suspicion and accusation that abounds in her high school world and in the post-World War II world around her, she struggles with the overarching question, "Who is my neighbor?"

I hope the novel will prompt teenagers to try to define what is meant by "neighbor" or how their particular religion defines "neighbor." They also might want to think about what is required of a person who believes in helping his neighbor. How far can—or should—he go in doing this? Are there limits or boundaries to our obligations to others?

Linda: Please share some thoughts on using young adult literature as a venue for teaching history.

Trudy: We have kids now who have no sense of their historical past at all or why it's relevant. I think that using novels to get them interested is perfect. A lot of times students think of history as just a bunch of dry facts, and the way it's sometimes taught, I could see why they think that. But everyone is connected to their time and place. We're all part of history. When you talk about getting kids interested in history through literature, the issues that are in the past seem to so many people like they're dead and gone, but what I see is that they just have a life of their own. They may come forward in another form, but they continue to

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be around us. You think about racism in *Spite Fences*—it’s better now, but it doesn’t mean there’s not a problem still. And you can talk about

I believe that it may have made young adults even more compassionate, patriotic, and sensitive to the issues of the global world in which all of us seem even more tightly connected, especially since 9-11. I think that 9-11 may have challenged those of us who write for young adults to speak even more deeply to the concerns they face.

McCarthyism in 1954, and we’re not afraid of McCarthy anymore, but we are afraid of Muslims and terrorists. We have to be careful that we don’t falsely accuse.

Linda: How has the post 9-11 world affected your outlook on teaching history through literature or writing historical fiction in general? In other words, as an author, what has the impact of 9-11 been?

Trudy: I find that the impact of 9-11 is yet to be understood. Still, I believe that it may have made young adults even more compassionate, patriotic, and sensitive to the issues of the global world in which

all of us seem even more tightly connected, especially since 9-11. I think that 9-11 may have challenged those of us who write for young adults to speak even more deeply to the concerns they face.

Linda: When did you start writing with a young adult audience in mind, and what prompted that interest?

Trudy: As far as audience goes, I never really think that I’m writing for a particular audience like a “teenage” audience. I am totally just focused on the writing, the story itself. However, I am consistently drawn to the struggles of characters who happen to be teenagers; I think that the years from 12-18 are some of the most intense, change-driven years of any person’s life, and they are replete with opportunities for fiction. Any literature—including litera-

ture for young adults—is, in my view, about how a character grows and changes, and there’s no developmental period as rich with growth and change as the adolescent years.

Linda: Your International Reading Association Award-winning book *Spite Fences* celebrated its 10th Anniversary in 2004. What do you think of that? How well has the book done over the years? What were your highlights with that book?

Trudy: I truthfully hadn’t realized that *Spite Fences* has already been in print for over ten years. The book has done very well, and I even met last summer with a screenwriter in Los Angeles who has optioned the novel and is hoping to turn it into a film. I suppose the most exciting thing that happened with *Spite Fences* was that it was used as part of an exchange program between Dayton and Sarajevo on the issue of racial healing. Young adults in Sarajevo read *Spite Fences*, and then they participated in a cultural exchange in which they were brought to Dayton and shared their stories, poems, and other artistic endeavors with young adults here in Dayton. I was honored to be the keynote speaker for this Dayton Peace Accords event.

Linda: Have any of your books become targets of censors, and if so, how did you feel about that?

Trudy: I’ve had one or two censorship challenges, and they astonish me. People will say things like “the book is anti-family,” and I’m just amazed. It’s very interesting to me. In one sense I feel bad about it, but in another sense I feel kind of proud because it makes me think “Gee, they’re really taking what I’ve written to heart.” My point of view is that when you write something, you just put it out there, and people are free to respond to it however they want to.

I also think about my preacher who is a close friend of mine, and he’ll say Sunday morning he gives a sermon that is about X, and people will come up to him after church and say, “Well, I liked that sermon about Y,” and he’ll think “Was that in there?” But I think people bring to a piece of writing who they are, what they need, their own

perceptions, and that kind of thing. I can't really be threatened by it.

For kids to grow up and know how to deal with the world they need to fill their minds with as much good stuff as they possibly can. They really need to be able to think through some tough things, so to the extent that we keep that from them, it can be a disadvantage. Kids can absolutely see a lot more than we give them credit for. Kids are not offended by things, their parents are.

Linda: Your website www.trudykrisher.com includes some really great information for teachers to include book reviews, classroom activities, suggestions for further reading, and thematic and interdisciplinary connections. How involved were you in creating that, and what are your thoughts on the site?

Trudy: As a teacher I think I can tell what makes a good lesson plan or assignment, and I was kind of afraid of who the publisher might have putting these things together. But at Random House they hire professional teachers and consultants. The

person who put together the information on *Spite Fences* and *Kinship* is named Pat Scales, and I think she did an excellent job. I can't say enough about the quality of the assignments.

Linda: As an author, what is it like for you to see students respond to your novels in the ways that Kirsten Lutz and Shannon Wensyel did? (see Figures 1 & 3)

Trudy: I have been an English teacher my whole life. I'm sort of like a writer who teaches, but mostly I'm a teacher who writes because teaching is what I do. So when I see things like this happening in the classroom with kids, it really does make my heart beat faster because that's really what you want to do is connect with kids. The speeches show that Kirsten really understood the book and was really relating to it. And with Shannon's example of repetition, a lot of students think they are not to repeat the same thing over and over again, but this shows how it can be a really effective dramatic device.

Student Shannon Wensyel assumed the role of character, Magnolia, from *Spite Fences* when composing this extended scene using rhythm and repetition.

Mama, Please

Mama, I see the way you look at me, and I know it's not the way a mother should look at her daughter. I know it's not the way other mothers do, and I know that if I ever have a daughter, I won't look at her this way. I see how angry you get when I let you down, when I make you ashamed, or when I am just in the way. But I don't understand, Mama. I don't understand why you get so angry. I don't understand why you act as if you hate me, as if I'm the worst of the worst.

I am tired of trying to understand you. That's why I am leaving—because I'm just plain tired. I don't want to have to be afraid to come home anymore. I don't want to have to lie about my marks and welts and bruises. I don't want to have to flinch when you raise your hand. I'm tired of being afraid of my own mama.

Mama, please—just love me. It makes me sick that I have to ask you—that I have to ask my own mama to care about me and not do me wrong. Doesn't it make *you* sick, too? Doesn't it make you sick that your daughter fears you, that your own daughter can't bear to be in the same house as you anymore? Well it makes *me* mighty sick, Mama.

I can't really believe I've stayed *this* long. Despite your beatings and abuse, despite the fact that my hard work went without notice or thanks, despite the pain of always being the "other" child—the lesser child—and even despite the fact that I was blamed for bringing shame to this family when the most shameful thing of all is your anger and ugliness, I stayed. Maybe I was waiting for things to change—for *you* to change. But it's all gotten to be too much, Mama; and if you can't love me, if you can't promise me here and now that you'll never say another word to hurt me or lay another hand on me, I am leaving. I will leave, and I will not look back. Mama? Mama, please.

Figure 3. Repetition for Dramatic Effect (From Linda J. Rice, *What Was It Like? Teaching History and Culture through Young Adult Literature*, Figure 7.7. New York: Teachers College Press, ©2006 by Teachers College, Columbia University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.)

Linda: How did you get your start as a writer?

Trudy: I loved literature, and I loved to read, but nobody ever said “oh, you’ve got to be a writer.” When my first child Laura was born in 1976, I wrote part time for the newspaper. I wrote a book review column each week that I was paid \$25.00 for, and while I was reading all the stuff that was current, I realized “I might want to try this some time.” I always wrote on my own and quietly and never thought anyone would ever publish anything I’d written. When my daughter Kathy was sick and in cancer treatment things were so hard for our family. But when she was better, I took this children’s literature class and wrote this book *Kathy’s Hat* (1992). It was a positive look at a child’s struggle with cancer and how her friends tried to help her through it. My class liked the story so much, and Kathy and I had started a support group for the kids at the hospital, so I decided I would self-publish this book. It was really a home-spun thing. My kids and I walked around the table and assembled the book ourselves with a spiral binding. We had a signing at a local bookstore, and then somebody I knew took the book and sent it to an agent. The agent sold it right away to a real publisher, and they published it. The publisher asked if I had anything else, and I sent her what was a draft of *Spite Fences*, and that’s how things happened. We went from this really dark period of time in our family that was so sad to the writing—the putting stuff down in words somehow that turned things around for me. It’s hard to believe that it worked like that, but that little home-spun book gave me my life. Kathy is now a lawyer in Columbus; we’re just so blessed.

Linda: What book or author would you say has been influential in your development as a writer?

Trudy: One of my favorite books is Anne Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. She has a real understanding for how unique and eccentric and odd all of us are in some way. She has a great sense of compassion for people, and I admire her work, especially her ability to develop characters. That’s what I’m really interested in as a writer—watching characters grow and change. Young people, of

course, are perfect examples of that intensity of change and growth that you like to create in literature.

Linda: I read on your website that you have two daughters and a son. What role have your children played in your writing, and how have they responded to your books and notoriety?

Trudy: Oh my [said with laughter], they don’t think I have any notoriety at all. I’m the person who makes their sandwiches. They think it’s cool that their mom writes novels, but they don’t see me as [an award-winning author]. They see me as the mother, the one who drove them to soccer games and irritated them when I reminded them to put on their seatbelts. But they have influenced me. I can’t think of anything I’ve done that has been more important to me than raising these kids. I was a single parent, and I decided many, many years ago that your kids don’t ask for you to be divorced, and so whatever I did my first effort was going to be that the kids were ok. One of the things that having kids did for me is give me a lot of insight about people and even myself. I used to think I had some strong points, but as part of a family, I’m growing right along with them and learning about myself. I happen to think, for example, I’m a good listener, but if you have teenagers [laughter], not so. When you’re a parent, you think you’re teaching them, but they teach you a lot. It’s sort of like being a teacher—the idea is you’re the font of all wisdom, but you know all good teachers will tell you their students teach them far more than they teach their students.

Linda: Besides being a writer, what are your major life passions in terms of how you spend your time?

Trudy: My whole life is pretty much about writing and teaching, which might sound really boring, except for I love what I do, and I think if you love what you do, then it doesn’t seem like it’s your job. So I’d say my biggest passion is really encouraging my students’ development—truly helping them to see that they have potential, that they are worth something. I think the biggest challenge for people is to figure out what their purpose is in life—what

is it that they're good at, and what is it they're supposed to be doing. So I see my job as a teacher as not only to teach my students English, but to help them to see that they have a purpose and to find out what that purpose is.

Also, I love nature. Last summer I went with some friends, and we got inter-tubes and floated down the Mad River on a hot summer afternoon—I love doing stuff like that. I love walking my dog. I love to swim. I don't have an exciting life, but that's ok. I'm a nester. I love my house. I love to sew.

Linda: What were you like as a high school student: Did you like reading? What activities were you involved in? What was your social life like?

Trudy: I was so busy with everything. I was in student government. I was always on committees—you know, the person who would always go and decorate for the dance. I had lots of friends. When I was in high school and they had “most likely to succeed” and all that, I was voted “most dependable”—a young person you could really count on. I've always been like that—very dependable, responsible, reliable.

I loved high school. I had a wonderful time in high school. I went to a great big high school in Florida. But I never kept a journal. I never sat around and read books; I was always climbing trees like Maggie [from *Spite Fences*]. I was always kickball and outside and would have enjoyed being on sports teams, but we didn't have them in those days.

I liked my English classes, and I used to feel my heart swell when I'd read poetry or something really good like that, but I never thought I'd have anything to do with it professionally. Writing is something I came to totally on my own. I had empathy for people and a way with words, but I didn't know you could put those things together until much later.

Linda: What else would you want teachers and readers to know about you?

Trudy: One of the things I most like to do is laugh. My friends tell me that I can make them laugh and have a sense of irony and play, even though at heart I'm a fairly serious person. But I do like to laugh, and you will find humor in my books even though they're about serious topics.

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