

VAMPIRES AND CENTAURS AND WEREWOLVES, OH MY!

AN INTERVIEW WITH **FRANCESCA LIA BLOCK**

► **JENNIFER HUBERT SWAN**



Award-winning author Francesca Lia Block has been busier than a flower fairy at an orchid convention! In addition to releasing two novels (*The Waters and the Wild* and *Pretty Dead*) and a new nonfiction book entitled *Wood Nymph Seeks Centaur: A Mythological Dating Guide*, the creator of the whimsical contemporary classic *Weetzie Bat* also found her book *Baby Be-Bop* at the center of a censorship controversy in West Bend, Wisconsin, last spring.

After a four-month-long challenge brought by local residents against *Baby Be-Bop*, which they considered “sexually explicit,” the West Bend Community Library Board voted unanimously to keep the book in the young adult collection. [*Editor’s Note: See Kristin Pekoll’s chronicle of this and other challenges in Stand Up! on page 284.*] This decision was received poorly by four other community members, who then filed a claim against the library for damages in the amount of \$120,000 for “being exposed to the book in a library display” and the right to publicly burn the library’s copy of *Baby Be-Bop*. Yes, you read that right: *burn*. (Want to view some of the public hearing testimonies? Here’s a scary sample: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBrrW6IFOD0>). Despite that crazy kerfluffle (or maybe because of it!), the sage FLB seemed more centered than ever as she chatted about music, **Facebook**, and exciting upcoming projects with me via an e-mail dialogue that took place in June 2009.

JHS: Your book about a gay teen’s coming-of-age, *Baby Be-Bop*, was challenged in two related censorship cases, one of which even seeks a public burning of the book at the West Bend Community Memorial Library in West Bend, Wisconsin. What has been your response as a writer and an artist?

FLB: I was upset to hear that this very gentle story caused such a strong reaction. I have been asked if this response will cause me to question what I write in the future. Of course, it will not.

JHS: Do you find it ironic that *Baby Be-Bop* was targeted when so many of your other books touch on topics like rape and incest? What kind of message do you think this challenge sends to gay teens?

FLB: I am dismayed that this book about love and self-expression could cause such a violent response. I only hope that gay teens can see past this [incident] and continue to value and respect themselves and their choices.

JHS: Like *Dirk* in *Baby Be-Bop*, many of your characters identify as loners and outsiders; as a writer, do you feel like an outsider yourself? After winning the Margaret A. Edwards Award from the American Library Association and a 2009 Phoenix Award from the Children’s Literature Association for *Weetzie Bat*, do you feel accepted or even embraced by the mainstream?

FLB: I think the culture has changed profoundly in the last twenty years. I feel more accepted by the mainstream. As an artist I will always feel like somewhat of an outsider, but this is a good

thing because it allows me to look at the world I am writing about with a certain distance and perspective. And let me say that I love librarians. They have supported me all along and been especially heroic during the West Bend incident. I am very grateful for the Phoenix award. It's an honor to have a book I wrote over twenty years ago be recognized in this way.

JHS: *I feel very confident in saying that librarians love you, too. You have two novels coming out this year, **The Waters and the Wild** and **Pretty Dead**. Do you feel that one may overshadow the other? Do you see them appealing to the same audience? Were they written simultaneously or is this just a publishing coincidence?*

FLB: They are very different books. **The Waters and the Wild** is for a slightly younger audience (although older readers may also embrace it) and it is a very poetic, metaphorical book. **Pretty Dead** is a more commercial and plot-driven book for an older audience. I think that many of my readers will enjoy both of them for different reasons. I went through a very productive period recently (possibly inspired by my high mortgage!) and due to some editing issues the books are coming out at the same time.

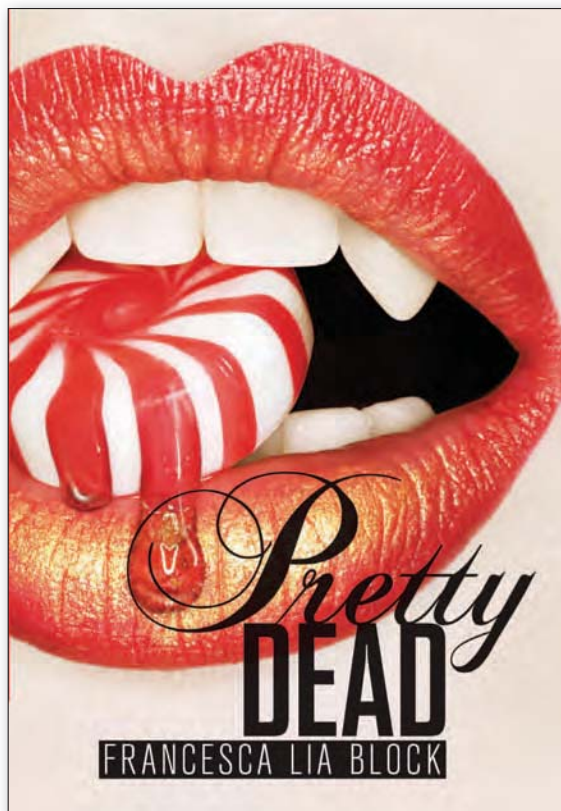
JHS: *In many of your works, such as **The Waters and the Wild** where teenager Bee discovers she is an actual changeling, mythological and fairy-tale motifs permeate your writing. Why do you think you are drawn to reinterpreting these classic stories and characters?*

FLB: I grew up on myths and fairy tales. I love the myth of **Orpheus** and the fairy tales of **Beauty and the Beast** and **The Snow Queen**. Myths and fairy tales have influenced me equally. They dance in my head. They inform everything I write and much of what I do in my life. I feel that I can understand everything better through the lens of these powerful stories.

JHS: *In **The Waters and the Wild**, I saw Bee's changeling status as being symbolic of the transformative power of adolescence, and appreciated how her two friends were "changed" simply by knowing her. Tell us a little more about the symbols you employed in this book and what message you hope readers come away with?*

FLB: For me, in this book, the changeling is a symbol of adolescence not fitting in, feeling "other," feeling alone and strange. Through the connections Bee makes with her friends, she begins to belong; however, she is not ever entirely of this world. She must learn to accept who she really is—a fairy—and return to that world just as we must grow up and eventually leave our childhoods behind.

JHS: *Your latest novel, **Pretty Dead**, is a vampire romance. Were you aware of the *Twilight* mania while writing **Pretty Dead**?*



FLB: Yes, but I wrote it anyway and did not read the books, although after **Pretty Dead** was finished, I saw the movie [version of **Twilight**] which I enjoyed. Two of my acquaintances tragically died and the only way I could process this was to turn to mythology. The vampire mythology worked best for me so I decided to write this book in spite of the "vampire mania."

JHS: *I love the theme that runs through **Pretty Dead** about art and creativity being the life "blood" that makes us human, and without them we would be as dead as vampires. Can you talk a little more about that?*

FLB: I know for myself art has literally saved my life and I see it healing the lives of many of my readers and students. Love, art, and creative expression animate us and make us truly alive.

JHS: *From **Weetzie Bat**'s vintage dresses to **Pretty Dead**'s Charlotte recalling her vampire history through*

the designer duds she has amassed (which was my favorite part of the book), your characters always have a passion for fashion. Where does your love and knowledge of fashion history originate?

FLB: I used to pore over European **Vogues** as a child, and I have always loved fashion for its aesthetics as well as a way to understand history. I still spend a lot of time (maybe too much time) thinking about clothing and what I am going to wear on dates! It is my guilty pleasure. I am currently obsessed with my skinny jeans tucked into

Taryn Rose boots, feminine T-shirts, white leather motorcycle jacket, silver chains, and black patent leather bag with silver hardware.

JHS: *Sounds very rock-star! When it comes to music, you've written online about your love of PJ Harvey, and in **Pretty Dead**, Charlotte describes rocking out to Portishead, Interpol, and the Rolling Stones. How does music influence you and your writing? Are*

there any current bands/singers that you are listening to who might make appearances in your future works?

FLB: I love the new Mike Snow album. (My boyfriend's brother's band; they are amazing!) I love The National, Frightened Rabbit, Robyn, and Lonely Dear. I like the music coming out of Sweden! Music inspires me profoundly and I often make mixes to go with my stories. **Pretty Dead** has "Wild Horses" by the Rolling Stones, "All Apologies" by Nirvana, a Ravi Shankar piece, the National "Ada", Goldfrapp, Ladytron, Interpol, and more. I'll probably be posting it on a Web site about the book.

JHS: *I'll definitely be looking up some of those bands on iTunes. And speaking of online entertainment, we are Facebook friends! How has social networking changed how you interact with your readers?*

FLB: I enjoy being in close touch with my readers. Even though I can't always write back, I check my mail constantly and read

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every message. I have even more admiration and respect for my readers now that I know them better. They inspire me on a daily basis. I'm on MySpace too. I've had one upsetting incident and two that were slightly disturbing [online] but worked out okay. Most of my experiences online have been good and I will continue to share this way for now.

JHS: I see from your Web site that you conduct writing workshops. What's it like being on the teaching side of the process?

FLB: I love teaching. It is very inspiring to me and I also learn a lot. I have a women's group where we share in-class exercises, as well as critique a few pages from each student that have been submitted before the group. I usually have a theme like Summer Solstice, Winter Equinox, Myths, Love, Change, or Transformation. I also have a monthly critique group of five students who are working on longer projects. They can submit twenty pages, and we spend the whole time critiquing them. I hope to create a stimulating, safe, critiquing environment.

JHS: You also do manuscript advising. What types of manuscripts (fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, etc.) do people usually bring you? Have you ever found a hidden gem? Conversely, what do you do when you're dealing with a piece of writing that should never have seen the outside of a desk drawer?

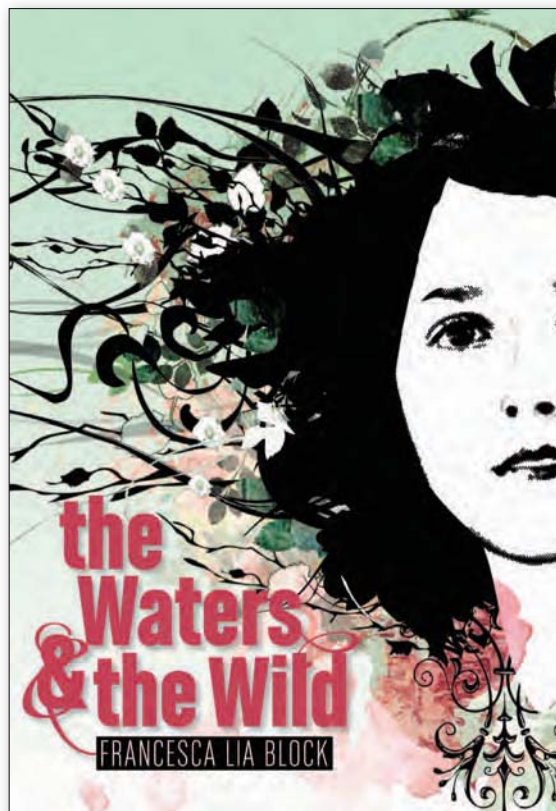
FLB: I have helped people with their fiction, as well as a memoir, poetry, and short stories, often with magical realism or fantasy elements. I have received a lot of strong material. If something is less strong, I can always find ways to help the writer improve it and discover the heart of their piece.

JHS: Can you share what you're working on next?

FLB: In addition to *The Waters and the Wild* and *Pretty Dead*, I have an adult book coming from Bloomsbury called *Wood Nymph Seeks Centaur: A Mythological Dating Guide*, illustrated by Fumi Nakamura. I divide males and females into twelve types each and then pair them up. There are satyrs, mermaids, elves, etc. It was a lot of fun to write but sometimes a bit painful to research! I based it on my love of mythology and my Internet dating experience.

I also have a children's book coming out called *House of Dolls*, which is beautifully illustrated by Barbara McClintock. It's an illustrated book for younger readers but not a picture book per se. I do have a picture book that I co-wrote with my agent Lydia Wills called *Little Pink*, but it's not out yet. In addition, I am working on a picture book for my son, Sam.

I am also working on a werewolf book called *The Frenzy*. It's about a red-haired, green-eyed, somewhat hirsute but beautiful female werewolf named Liv Thorne who lives in a small Midwestern town. Her parents are very conservative politically. She must learn to come to terms with the curse she has received due to something her mother did before she was born. As usual, it is true love and acceptance that heal, but in this book, there is also a lot of pain and sacrifice to go through first.



And I'm always tinkering with the *Weetzie Bat* script in case a movie finally materializes . . .

JHS: I would LOVE to see a *Weetzie Bat* movie! How about Tim Burton as director? If you had your choice of a dream cast, who would play Weetzie, My Secret Agent Lover Man, Dirk, and Duck?

FLB: Tim Burton's company was interested years ago but turned it down. I was thinking of Kristen Stewart for Weetzie but then she got *Twilight* . . . I like James Franco for MSALM, maybe. Not sure about Dirk and Duck. It's changed over the years as so many actors grew up and time passed . . . If you watch the Swedish singer Robyn you will see an exact Weetzie type, although she is older of course.

JHS: MMMmmm, James Franco... *Shakes head, focuses* Sorry! Finally, what does a typical day in the life of writer and artist Francesca Lia Block look like?

FLB: Waking up early, making breakfast for kids, taking them to school, going to gym, writing, picking them up, doing homework and hanging out, late night visits from a Werewolf. . . . On the weekends I go to yoga, have lunch with friends, write, and go hear amazing live (and mostly Swedish lately) music with said Werewolf.

JHS: Thanks for your time, Francesca, and here's hoping we get to see *Weetzie Bat: The Movie* starring James Franco and Robyn on the big screen some day soon. ■

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Jennifer Hubert Swan is the Middle School Librarian and Library Department Chair at Little Red School House and Elizabeth Irwin High School in Manhattan's incredibly cool Greenwich Village. She is the author of teen book review blog *Reading Rants! Out of the Ordinary Teen Booklists* (<http://www.readingrants.org>), and accompanying book *Reading Rants: a Guide to Books that Rock!* (Neal Schuman, 2007/VOYA October 2007). In her spare time she likes to quilt, watch reality TV, and search for wood nymphs that may be hiding in Forest Park, Queens. She has been a registered Blockhead since 1996, when she read *Weetzie Bat* for the first time and promptly went out and bought several copies to give to all her friends.