



Beth Kephart

Undercover
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Undercover Q&A with Beth Kephart

1. Before publishing *Undercover*, you had great success as a writer of adult nonfiction. What compelled you to branch out into the world of teen fiction? I had been writing memoirs, mostly, trying to make sense of parts of my past. At the same time, I was teaching young writers about the arts of fiction and poetry, reading some favorite books out loud to them. In the midst of all this, I had an extraordinary conversation with Laura Geringer, the editor of *Undercover*, who asked me to talk about who I had been as a young person. Her questions took me back to those parts of myself that I had never fully explored on the page—to a somewhat introverted young girl who wrote poems, who ice-skated, who had a teacher who believed in the power of stories. To a girl who was sometimes asked, by the popular boys, for advice and help as they pursued the girls of their dreams. I was never the girl of anyone's dreams. I took note of that. I wondered why. But some of my best friends became the guys who professed love for other girls. I was in a strange position, then—in the shadows, always,

but also indispensable. After Laura and I finished our conversation, I boarded a train. The train had not pulled out of the station when the first line of *Undercover* came to me. By the time the next day dawned, I had written ten pages. I had been liberated, by the conversation, to remember something that was important to me, and I was liberated by the rules and non-rules of fiction to stitch together fragments of truth with the characters and places I began to imagine. Writing for young adults has since become my passion. Young adults are enormously interesting people facing complex choices, convergences, turning points. They are readers for whom I love to write. Readers I trust with my stories.

2. What authors, illustrators or creators influenced you as a young adult? Have you met any of your literary heroes? I was writing poems from the time that I was quite young, and I was very influenced by music, the sound of words. I loved to sing. I loved to perform, with my brother and sister, to the sound tracks of *The Music Man* or *My Fair Lady* or *Windjammer*. I always had rhymes sliding around in my head. So that even as I got older, I would return to Robert Louis Stevenson and Hans Christian Andersen to see how they created what they created. I would read F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway and Sinclair Lewis, also, to learn about how words fit together. And then, of course, there was *Black Beauty*.

3. What is your writing process? Do you have any advice to give our young writers out there? Oh, I wish there were more room! I write in the dark of the early morning hours, mostly, when there is silence in the house. I concentrate on voice, character, color, and mood, and allow myself to be surprised, in places, by the plot. The worst thing a writer can be is bored with her own work. If I know all the answers of a story before I start, I'm not going to be as engaged as I need to be to write well all the way through. After the hours tick by and it is day again, I turn most of my attention to my job—to the communications business that I run. In the middle of the day I take a long walk and think about where my stories are going. I get them close to me again that way. Keep notebooks. Write five metaphors every day. Don't go to bed before you write down three things from the day that intrigued you. Listen to how other people talk—at school, on buses, on trains, in stores—and write down interesting expressions. Don't just read stories for plot. Read to understand how a story or a book was made. Practice the art of foreshadowing. Become familiar with the tools and techniques of backstory. Never leave a piece of in-progress work in a neatly summed-up place. Always leave yourself hanging on the edge of a cliff, so that you can't wait to get back, to find out what absolutely must happen next.

4. The protagonist of *Undercover*, Elisa, is a bright and talented young woman who loves to write, yet she is inhibited by her shyness. Did you base this character on anyone that you know in particular? Were you similar to Elisa when you were a teen? Elisa and I do share many traits, I have to confess. She's got a whole blooming world in her head, and so many images that they sometimes seem to chase her. She's taught herself to skate on a pond. She needs to be encouraged to believe in herself. She has a great English teacher. But I didn't grow up in Elisa's family. My dad traveled, but he always came reliably home. My mom sewed, but she also always cooked, always gave us the most spectacular holidays, didn't talk the way that Elisa's mom does, nor act that way either. I'm the middle child of three.

5. Elisa has been compared to a modern-day Cyrano de Bergerac. Was this novel of the same name an influence for you in writing *Undercover*? Did you draw from any other books, movies, or experiences to help the novel come to life? I love the Cyrano story. I've seen a couple of different film versions of it, and I always found them moving. But not until I started writing *Undercover* did I read the original play. It is rather brilliant, and it was terrific fun—and essential, plot-wise—to weave passages of it into my story. There is an ice-skating scene in this story that is vaguely drawn from something that happened in real life. I won't give it away here, but let's just say that after I'd taught myself to skate on a pond, I began to take lessons at a real rink and to compete in local competitions. It was during one of those competitions that I saw a very unkind thing being done to the hometown skating star. I never forgot it.

6. Why did you choose to make Elisa an ice skater? Skating—the floating on ice, the leaps, the edging, the choreography to music—is the closest thing there is, in my mind, to writing. I am always dancing, still. I take long walks. I move myself so that I can make room for words to move within me. Skating is essential in my life, and *Undercover* was my first novel. The two belonged together.

7. If you could speak directly to Elisa and give her one piece of advice, what would you say? Stop seeing yourself as secondary, invisible. Trust the world to want to know you as you are.

8. Your next book, *House of Dance*, is slated for release in summer 2008. What can you tell us about this new project? Are you currently writing any other novels? *House of Dance* is the story of fifteen-year-old Rosie, who is given the enormous responsibility of caring for her grandfather during the final summer of his life. He trusts her to sort through his things and to set aside those that matter. She struggles to know just what he means. She can't turn to her mother, for her mother is preoccupied, and her father is long gone, and her best friend is down at the beach, and there's this guy she likes, but he's too often at work. Rosie learns the hardest and most important lessons that summer. She also finds a way to give her grandfather one final gift, a gift that ultimately involves an entire community of bakers, florists, a seamstress, and a studio of exquisite dancers. *House of Dance* is such an important book to me, and so is my third book, just now finished, titled *The Heart Is Not a Size*.