

BOOKS

Beauty and Darkness: An Interview with Suzi Wizowaty

BY E.A. ALLEN

Tour of Evil
Suzi Wizowaty
Philomel, 2005

Suzi Wizowaty takes us across the ocean with her second novel (and first children's book), *A Tour of Evil*. While her first novel, *The Round Barn* (Hardscrabble Books, 2002), happens right here in the Green Mountain State, Wizowaty's latest occurs in an area no less replete with atmospheric history: the eerie cathedrals of northern rural France.

Sick of foster homes, *Tour's* 11-year-old heroine, Alma, runs away to the town's cathedral. She discovers that the imposing edifice harbors a twisted tour guide. His menacing secret will force her to confront hard questions about family and hope, despair and evil.

Answering my slightly less difficult questions in a recent email interview, Wizowaty discussed her love of Vermont, the visceral punch of childhood experiences and the creepy allure of Gothic architecture.

EA: Tell me a bit about your history as a writer.

SW: My family moved around a huge amount when I was a kid, and I didn't have a lot of friends, so I read a lot. Characters in books became my closest allies, and not only the characters but their authors, too. Naturally I wanted to be an author as well.

I hit obstacles — rejections I wasn't prepared for. For several years I gave up writing fiction altogether. Instead I wrote newsletters for a theater, book reviews, freelance essays for a local paper.

Then, in a blink of an eye, I was approaching 30. I realized that if I wanted to have written novels by the time I was 65 (what I imagined then as the end of one's productive life!), I had to get on it. I went to Goddard and drafted my first novel.

Eighteen years later, Hardscrabble Books published *The Round Barn*. It was the fourth novel I'd written, although it was the first one I wrote for adults. ... If you give

up after the first unpublished novel, as many people do, you simply join the ranks of the disappointed. It's not about talent: Vermont is crawling with talented writers (I know; I teach writers). It's about relentless persistence in the face of failure.

EA: How long have you lived in Vermont? What effect does the Vermont setting have on your writing?

SW: I've lived in Vermont four times as long as I lived anywhere as a child. I've seen homes in my Burlington neighborhood turn over to the next generation. I love that. But trying to explain why I love Vermont would be like trying to explain why I love my partner: Suffice it to say I feel at home here.

EA: One of your childhood homes was northern France, where there were many cathedrals like the one in the book. What about these buildings interested you so much?

SW: They're magnificent. You walk in and the sheer size takes your breath away. You're in this vast, echoing space that distorts sound. You walk over tombstones in the floor; you peer at weird relics on purple pillows behind glass; to me as a kid, all this was very mysterious and cool.

EA: Is the cathedral in *Tour of Evil* based on a particular one somewhere in France? What type of research did you do in preparation?

SW: It's based loosely upon the cathedral at Chartres, which I loved as a teenager but don't remember well enough to describe. Henry Adams' *Mont Saint-Michel & Chartres* helped me. I've been to Paris many times; but never back to Chartres. Sometimes it's better to draw on memories. Few adult experiences have the sensory power of those from childhood.

EA: With its rich descriptive passages and its strong sense of moodiness, *Tour of Evil* reads like a Gothic love letter to cathedrals that anyone of a particular sensibility can enjoy. So I was surprised that *A Tour of Evil* was marketed a) as a children's

book and b) as a mystery. How would you describe this novel?

SW: *A Tour of Evil* is being marketed as a mystery because Philomel did market research that indicated that children want more mysteries. (I objected, but I had no say in the matter.) I think of it as a spooky Gothic adventure. I did write it for children, or perhaps for the child in myself, the kind of child who wants to know why people knowingly harm others. Unfortunately, that child won't find the answer here, but she might find some counterbalancing images.

EA: On a related note, the cathedral is as much a character as any of the people in the book. Do you have any literary role models for such a living, breathing setting?

SW: My mother is an art historian, and my siblings and I were dragged through hundreds of churches and cathedrals when we were children living in Europe. (What doesn't kill you will make you stronger.) I love the space and quiet, the grandeur, of religious buildings of all kinds.

EA: *A Tour of Evil* also examines the characters' longing for family, home and acceptance. What prompted you to link the subject of orphans with the subject of cathedrals? Does being a queer person as well as an artist play into that at all?

SW: No doubt. But I think it goes beyond that, to what it is deep down that leads one to become an artist or any kind of fringe-identified person in the first place.

Remember the scene in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (the book), where Quasimodo races into Notre Dame and cries "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!?" Or the appalling betrayal of Thomas Beckett's murder in the cathedral? In the 20th-century European imagination the cathedral offers a kind of refuge which has no American equivalent. Where are you going to run to in this country to be safe? There is nowhere. ▼

Elizabeth A. Allen seeks sanctuary in really good books, which she reads voraciously in her Somerville, MA, home.



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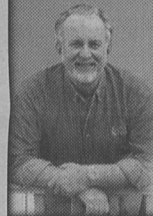
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