



## Ellen Wittlinger

A former children's librarian with a master's degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Ellen Wittlinger has published poems, plays, short stories, and novels during her life, but it was with *Hard Love* that she reached prominence in the field of books for teenagers when it was named a Printz Honor Book in 2000.

**Don Gallo:** You grew up in Illinois. Where, exactly, and were you born there too?

**Ellen Wittlinger:** I was born (1948) and raised in [Belleville, Illinois](#), a town of about 50,000 people just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.



2 years old, 1950.

**DG:** What particular memories do you have of your teenage years in Belleville?

**EW:** I went to a large junior high school and an even larger high school—there were 880 kids in my graduating class. So even though the town was not that big, I felt like a very small fish at the

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high school. The good thing about a big school is that there isn't just one "popular" group—and besides, there are so many kids around that it doesn't seem so important to be in any particular group. I had a large, eclectic group of friends who were interested in everything from math to drama to violin.

There was no literary magazine, so I became involved with the yearbook as the layout editor, figuring out the design of each page. My other extracurricular activity was working on the plays and musicals the drama department put on. I was never onstage though—I didn't have the nerve to audition! But I loved doing the backstage work, painting and sawing and moving stuff around.

**DG:** And what about outside of school?

**EW:** One of our favorite recreational activities was loading a car (or two) full of kids and going to the [drive-in movie theater](#) where there was usually as much talking going on in the car as on the screen. What a shame there are so few of these left now! Then we'd cruise to a drive-in hamburger stand—everything was drive-in! Sometimes we'd end an evening by driving over to St. Louis and sitting under the just completed [St. Louis Arch](#) which glimmered in the moonlight and threw a silvery shadow onto the river. This trip was strictly prohibited by parents, of course, so a certain amount of subterfuge was required.

**DG:** Sounds like pretty typical teenage behavior. What else?

**EW:** What I remember most about high school is wearing maroon outfits to school on Friday for School Spirit day (our team was the "Maroons"—can you imagine a worse name?), slumber parties with my girlfriends, toilet-papering trees, bleaching my hair green (accidentally) and listening enraptured to the Beatles. Those are the big things, but if I concentrate I can remember more: the sticky, twisted-up feeling of wearing a girdle all day in hopes I'd look thinner, the frantic search for the right people to eat lunch with, the crush of humanity in the hallways between classes, an incompatible locker mate, the nauseating fear of algebra class in which I could barely even hear the teacher over [my pounding heart](#), and could never understand him.

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Junior year high school  
yearbook picture.

**DG:** Except for the girdle, those sound pretty much like the kinds of experiences any teenager today could have. What kind of student were you in middle school and high school?

**EW:** I was always a pretty good student, although math terrified me and I stopped taking it as soon as I could. I don't know why—my mother was and is good at math and so is my daughter. For me all those numbers and symbols just blurred together—probably because I was often crying! I didn't care for German class either, the language most of us were funneled into because so many of our families came from that background. But English I loved—reading books was always a joy for me and writing came easily too, although in those days I didn't think I'd BE a writer. I also took as many art courses as I could. My secret desire was to be a painter, although I knew it wasn't a practical enough career choice to please my parents. As an only child there was a lot of pressure on me to be a good kid, make my parents proud, and I lived up to it most of the time, but resented it too. Once I got away to college I decided I could do what I wanted to do—so I became an art major, much to my parents' chagrin.

**DG:** You said there was a lot of pressure on you "to be a good kid." Did that pressure come from your parents? From the community? Or did you put that on yourself?

**EW:** The community I grew up in was an old German town and Germans are big on following rules, at least the ones I knew were. A lot of the pressure to be good came from my parents, but also from the community as a whole. I was an only child too, and an only grandchild, so there were always a lot of older people around telling me what to do.

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**DG:** What kind of work did your parents do?

**EW:** My father was a butcher and my mother a bookkeeper. They owned a small neighborhood grocery store for most of my growing up years. But supermarkets were just coming onto the scene then, and they had a hard time making ends meet with a small store. They worked long hours; even after the store closed in the evenings, my dad had to get the meat counter ready for the next day or stock shelves while my mother did the bookkeeping and made up the orders for the wholesalers. Since the store was attached to our house—we lived in back of it—they were around all the time, but were not really very available to me. Still, I loved having the store there. There was always somebody to go out and talk to, or watch. On Saturdays I bagged groceries and even learned to use the cash register. And my friends thought my living arrangements ideal! They always wanted to play at my house because we could go into the store and get free Popsicles or sodas for our snacks.



With Mom & Dad at 5  
years old, 1953.

**DG:** That does sound convenient. How did you get along with your parents back then?

**EW:** My teen years were a strain for all of us. As I said, my parents were rather strict. As a young child I accepted it, but, of course, teenagers need to push the boundaries, and I did. My mother and I often had screaming fights about things as silly as how I wanted to wear my hair (ratted up instead of brushed out). And the horrible thing is that now I find myself complaining about my children's hair too! Although, I like to think I have a better sense of humor about it. I think a lot of the things I did—some smoking, some drinking, although never all that much—were done to get a rise out of my parents, to get their goat. Once my mother figured this out and

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calmed down her own reaction, we got along much better.

**DG:** You were 45 years old before your first novel was published. How did you get from Belleville to being a writer of novels for teens?

**EW:** I left Belleville to go to [Millikin University](#), a small school in central Illinois. While there I majored in [art](#) and sociology—the sociology thrown in so that my parents believed I would be able to get a job when I graduated. But painting was my first love then, although I always took lots of English courses and became the editor of the literary magazine by my junior year. There was one English teacher at Millikin who encouraged me in my poetry writing, and by my senior year, he suggested I might want to apply to the [Iowa Writer's Workshop](#). (It was by then becoming clear to me that my writing ability surpassed my painting ability—a sad realization.)

After graduating, I took one year off to explore the country, but lived in Oregon most of that time, then applied to Iowa and was accepted. I spent two years at Iowa, getting my MFA in creative writing and learning what it meant to be a writer. Read, read, read. Write, write, write.

**DG:** I've heard both enthusiastic and critical comments about the Iowa Writers' Workshop. How was your experience there a positive one for you?

**EW:** My experience in the workshop itself was not positive. I think it's primarily positive only for the star students—maybe half a dozen out of a hundred. Otherwise the competition is so terrible you can taste it and the faculty feed into it. Publication, more than writing well, becomes the goal. When I was there it was a heavily male environment in which most of the (few) women were not very comfortable. However, I did make a number of wonderful friends there (including my husband) and I think the fact of being there made me take myself seriously as a writer for the first time. For many people the pressure of the place just made them give up.

**DG:** That's obviously not encouraging. But at least some good came out of that for you. Then what did you do?

**EW:** Following Iowa I moved to Boston because people kept telling me I "had" to be on the East Coast to be a writer (not true) and I was scared to go to New York City (too huge.) Soon after moving east I spent two years on a fellowship at the [Fine Arts Work Center](#) in [Provincetown, Massachusetts](#), out on the tip of Cape Cod. This was a wonderful experience and a beautiful spot in which to live. I was still writing poems at this point and by 1979 I published a book of poetry called *Breakers*.

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Harvesting mussels in  
Provincetown, 1976.

Marriage soon followed, and then children (two: Kate and Morgan). My husband, David, and I moved to Cambridge and then out to the suburbs to raise the kids. Writing time was scarce in those days, but I'd begun to write plays by this time, which I loved to do, managing to fit in some writing time during the kids' naps. Having the plays produced, if only locally, was thrilling—there's nothing like seeing your characters actually come to life!

**DG:** When and why did you switch to writing novels?

**EW:** I'd always done a little bit of fiction writing. Several novels were stuck in drawers after they got little attention from publishers. A few short stories appeared in small magazines, but that's all. Then, in 1990, I got a job as a children's librarian at the library in our town. I liked it very much, even singing "I'm a Little Teapot" to the children, but the thing I liked best was recommending books to children who came in looking for something to read. In order to be a good recommender, I had to read LOTS of books, and I did. The great surprise to me was how much I loved reading the young adult novels—I thought they were wonderful!

So, I began to work on my first young adult novel, *Lombardo's Law*. It was published in 1993, and I gave up my librarian job to write full time.

**DG:** Interesting progression. You started your career writing poetry and plays. What did those experiences teach you about writing in general? And how has writing poetry and plays influenced your writing novels for teens?

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**EW:** Starting out as a poet gave me tremendous respect for the individual word and how important it is to always use the right one. I think I moved to writing plays because I wanted to use characters. What I learned was how you make a character come to life, how a small gesture can define a personality. I also learned how to move characters around—it's different in a book, of course, but I think it helps the reader visualize the scene if they can imagine the people in relationship to each other. And I suppose it also helped me to think of the flow of a novel in terms of scenes. The greatest influence of my plays on my YA novels is probably my ability to write dialogue. Or maybe that's just what led to my interest in both genres. I like revealing personality through dialogue—and I liked YA novels from the start because they tended to be dialogue-heavy.

**DG:** Do you write full time now, or do you have other jobs that help pay the bills?

**EW:** At the moment I don't have another job. I was teaching a writing course at [Emerson College](#) for awhile, and I may be doing another one at a different Boston area college by next year. I enjoy the teaching because it puts me in contact with college age kids—who aren't that much older than the age group I'm writing for. But I do find that spending so much time reading and critiquing other people's writing cuts into my time and energy for my own work. It's a trade-off.

**DG:** Please tell us a little bit about the town where you now live. And will you please describe your house for us—what's special about it for you?

**EW:** The town I live in currently—[Swampscott, Massachusetts](#)—is very much like Scrub Harbor in *What's In A Name*—a small New England town divided between the old timers and the new folks. The town is north of Boston, right along the water, with pretty views of the city, but a bit too much trash on the beach. I do like my house—a [100-year-old Dutch Colonial](#)—very much. It's not large, but there are a number of small, cozy rooms. The furniture is comfortable, but somewhat mauled by the animals. The walls are painted bright colors and there are paintings crowded in everywhere—many of them the work of talented friends. And books, of course—the walls are lined with books! It's the kind of house people seem to feel very comfortable in.

**DG:** Sounds lovely. And where do you do most of your writing? Describe your office space, please.

**EW:** My office is a small bedroom on the second floor—I wish it was bigger because there isn't enough room for all my books! There is a large Milton Avery poster hanging over my computer—he's one of my favorite painters. There's also a large poster (blown up from a photograph) of my two kids when they were very little. And lots of newer pictures of them too.

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Like all my rooms, my office is overcrowded, but I can usually find what I want without too much trouble.

**DG:** Do you ever snack while you write? What's your favorite thing to nibble on?

**EW:** I drink lots of tea and like to have a package of NIPS close by — especially the chocolate parfait ones!

**DG:** Yummy! Do you ever play music in the background while you write? Are there particular kinds of music you prefer?

**EW:** Once in a while I'll play something like Indian flute music which isn't distracting, but usually I prefer to have silence so I can hear the rhythm of the writing. The music I prefer these days is what's called singer-songwriter or new folk music. Dar Williams, [Cheryl Wheeler](#), [John Gorka](#), [Greg Brown](#), [Patty Larkin](#)—there are lots of them, but they aren't played on the regular radio stations. [Chris Smither](#), who's more R&B, and [Eva Cassidy](#), who sang an eclectic mix of music before her recent death, are two other favorites. [Bob Franke](#) fits into this category too—I quoted from his song "Hard Love" and also stole it to title my book *Hard Love*. My husband and I help run a volunteer coffeehouse so we hear a lot of this music in a very intimate setting—there's nothing better.

**DG:** Your coffee house experiences sound interesting. How did you and your husband get involved in that?

**EW:** This particular coffeehouse—[the me and thee](#) in [Marblehead, MA](#)—was begun 30 years ago. It's the oldest continuous church coffeehouse in the country—and we'd gone to concerts there several times a year for many years, and often brought our kids along too. Then, at some point, our daughter, Kate, really fell in love with some of these musician (and began doing her own singer-songwriter gigs at open mikes in the area). So she volunteered to work at the coffeehouse. Well, we thought, if she can do it, so can we! For years we'd discussed volunteering, but when the kids were younger it seemed more difficult, but then one of them beat us to the punch! Now I'm one of two coordinators who run the kitchen (we serve great brownies and cookies, hot cider, coffee, tea, and Italian sodas) and my husband helps with the financial side of things.

**DG:** Speaking of your highly-praised novel *Hard Love*, from where did you get your knowledge of 'zines?

**EW:** My daughter and I were visiting a good friend of mine who has a daughter the same age—they were fifteen then. My friend's daughter, Colette, had just started writing her own zine and

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had copies of many others she showed me. It occurred to me what a great outlet zines were for kids who might be shy or who didn't fit in at school. Colette told me all about the free exchange spot at Tower Records (which is, unfortunately, gone now) and I spent a day walking up and down Newbury Street and in and out of Tower, looking for my characters and their environment. I also wrote letters to about a dozen other teen zine authors, asking them the hows and whys of [zine production](#), and most of them wrote me wonderfully insightful letters about it.

**DG:** That's a great connection with real kids as authorities. What is it about teenagers that you like so much?

**EW:** The energy, the honesty, the lying, the bravado, the vulnerability, the hope, the enthusiasm, the adventurousness. Teens are involved with life on such an intimate basis, even though it's often a very self-centered view of it. We were all great at fifteen, even if we didn't know it. I like to keep in touch with teenagers because it helps me remember who I am, too—at least who I am when I'm not the grouchy, nervous, worried MOTHER of teenagers.

**DG:** Yeah, being a parent changes one's perspective. It's impossible not to worry. Before you write any book, how do you get started with ideas, characters, plotting? Do you jot down those ideas in a notebook, on notecards, in a journal; do you use a pad of paper in the process, or do you go directly to the computer?

**EW:** I jot down lots and lots of notes first. Then, before I can really write anything coherent I need to have names for my characters. Their names are very important to me in terms of who I think they'll be—I can spend days getting the names right. Then I'll usually start a first chapter—on the computer—and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite that first chapter (sometimes two chapters) until I really understand what the heck this book is about. At that point I stop again and go back to a pad of paper and make something like a chapter outline. I won't stick to it very well as I go along—it's just to help me see where I'm headed. Then it's back to the computer to push out a first draft.

**DG:** So how DO you find the right names for your characters? Do you use a popular-names-for-babies book? Or a telephone directory?

**EW:** Both of the above. I have three baby name books—one of them is better on ethnic-sounding names. And telephone directories are good for last names. I have one from my hometown (Belleville, Illinois) which has very different last names than my Swampscott phone book—more long Germanic names like Schwartzberger. But sometimes I'll just hear a name somewhere and KNOW I have to use it. One of my daughter's friends suggested Shaquanda and it sounded so perfect I used it in *What's In A Name*. The naming may actually be my very

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favorite part of writing!

**DG:** That's cool. What kind of computer do you use, and what word processing program?

**EW:** A Compaq Presario PC with Microsoft Word.

**DG:** When you are not at the computer, do you write notes at your desk, or do you prefer other comfortable places, like a couch, rocking chair, kitchen table . . . ?

**EW:** I do have another desk in my writing room besides my computer table, but usually I use that more for business stuff—it's often piled high with mail or publishers' catalogs or file folders. Otherwise I like to sit either at the dining room table—the best place for editing/rewriting—or on the living room couch for thinking/ notetaking.

**DG:** What's your usual writing schedule? Do you feel the need to write every day?

**EW:** When I'm really working on a particular novel, yes, I need to work every day so I stay with the story. If I'm forced to stop for a period of time because of other demands, it takes time and effort to reimmerge myself in the book and I always fear I won't be able to get back the same feeling for the book that I had originally (although so far that hasn't happened.) Once I finish something though, I need down-time. I really like to try to finish a book by spring planting time each year so I can get outside and do something totally different for a while before I start something new. Of course it doesn't always work out that way.

**DG:** How do you start each writing day? Do you have rituals you go through before you start typing?

**EW:** Well, the first ritual is finding where I put my computer glasses, without which there will be NO writing done. Then I often read my e-mail and respond to it. This can be a problem, however, since more and more people are on-line now and it's so easy to dash off a note. But some days the e-mail messages are overwhelming and take so much time I don't get to writing as soon as I'd like to. I haven't quite figured out what to do about this problem. Once my son is in college (and thus not on the computer every moment he's home) I think I'll wait to check my e-mail until later in the day. The computer I write on (I should explain) is upstairs in my writing room; the family computer, which is the one on-line, is in the basement and has to be shared by us all.

**DG:** And how do you know when it's time to stop writing each day?

**EW:** I don't always. Again, if I'm working well on something, I hate to stop. Since I still do the cooking for my family, I have to stop in time to make dinner; I usually don't stop for lunch, just

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grab something from the kitchen and take it upstairs. But once dinner is over and I've rested with a cup of tea for a few minutes, I will often go back upstairs and work until bedtime, which is about 11 p.m. I have to pull myself away. But that's good—I'm always glad to be in a state like that because it means I'm totally inside the work and writing well. There are other days when I'm looking at my watch all afternoon, waiting for "quitting time" because I'm off the track somehow. When that happens, I might just as well stop and do something else and try again the next day.

**DG:** How involved in your writing are other members of your family?

**EW:** My husband is a senior reference editor with Houghton-Mifflin so he's always been a good resource for me. I'm always calling him at work with questions like, "What color is a tern?" or "What's a fiber optic cable?" He's my personal encyclopedic dictionary. My daughter, Kate, now 19, has always been my first reader. She's a natural editor (and grade-school spelling champ) herself and she catches all my spelling and grammatical errors. But more than that, she's my teenage voice—she knows if something just doesn't sound right. My son Morgan, 16, prefers to wait until the books are published and have covers and a jacket before he reads them. He loves the fact that they're usually dedicated to him and his sister, and his friends are all rather impressed with that too.



On the front steps with her husband, David, daughter, Kate, son, Morgan, and the family dog, Ruby Tuesday, 1989.

**DG:** You are fortunate to have such authoritative resources in your own home! So, before a

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book of yours is published, your daughter always reads the manuscript. How much of your writing do you share with other people before it's published? And of what value has that been for you?

**EW:** In addition to my daughter, my husband usually reads the manuscript, and both of them are great helps. I also take chapters to my monthly critique group meetings. We're a small group: [Pat Lowery Collins](#) and Anita Riggio and me. Anita has just joined us, and Suzanne Freeman has just left us to move to Virginia—a big loss for us. I love the critique group—we read each other's work, but even more importantly, I think, we are the water-cooler-colleagues for each other that we don't have on a day-to-day basis. Writing is such a lonely occupation and it's so great to be with other people who understand that. Sometimes our talk is as much about the business concerns of writing as about the manuscripts.

**DG:** How much advice do you get on your work in progress from your editor and from your agent?

**EW:** With the last few books, I've sent the first chapter and a synopsis to both my agent, Ginger Knowlton, and my editor, David Gale. They might make a few suggestions or ask a few questions at this point (especially David), but basically I just need them to nod their heads. Then I finish the book before I send it to them again. And at that point I'm able to deal with a more complete critique of it because I've gotten the whole thing out of my head and down on paper. Too much critiquing too early on can be dispiriting, I think.

**DG:** I'll buy that. *Lombardo's Law* was your first novel for teens. Where did the idea for that originate?

**EW:** I always like to have at least one of my characters be some kind of an artist since that identity was so important to me growing up (and is to my kids too) and I'm so familiar with the pros and cons of that kind of identity. And video is such a growing interest for kids now that it seemed a good means of uniting these two. The idea of Mike being younger than Justine came about because I saw it happening to kids around me and didn't recall ever reading a YA novel in which an older girl fell for a younger boy. Seemed like it could make for interesting tensions. I really was winging it altogether on that book—didn't even know if I could write a YA, so it was all seat-of-the-pants.

**DG:** The artistic elements are no doubt important to many readers who don't often find those kinds of characters in contemporary novels. Another prominent feature of all of your books is romance, but none of your books falls mainly into the Romance category, because there is so much more to your novels than boy-girl relationships. Why didn't you just want to write

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romances?

**EW:** I never wanted to write romances. Romance seems to mean more of a fantasy relationship and I'm not interested in writing fantasies. I think that first love is such a huge and important aspect of being a teenager and is all wrapped up in what "coming of age" means. Young love is not for "puppies" —it's not cute, although it is sometimes funny. The first time love knocks you off your feet is so spectacular and often so painful—it's one of the most dramatic times of life. It involves jealousy, sexuality, betrayal, heartbreak—all the big themes of literature—and I guess what I'm really hoping to write is literature for teenagers.

**DG:** Nicely said. I think teen readers appreciate that perspective. In *Noticing Paradise*, your characters meet on a cruise of the Galapagos Islands. What made you choose the Galapagos?

**EW:** My family had just returned from a [Galapagos](#) cruise—not two weeks like in the book—only four days. It was such an amazing place I wanted to be able to describe it in a book—and all the animal life was so metaphorical too. What better place, I thought, for first love to develop?

**DG:** Darwin would be pleased. Another feature of your most recent books is that you tell the story from more than one perspective. For example, in *Noticing Paradise*, the chapters alternate points of view between the Cat and Noah. In *What's in a Name*, we are treated to the perspective of a whole bunch of characters. And in *Hard Love* you treat readers not only to two different perspectives, but you add samples from John's and Marisol's personal writings, printed in different fonts and type faces, as well as drawings. Why do you choose that format over the more traditional—and probably easier—form of a single narrator and a single perspective?

**EW:** I just think it's more interesting to see inside the heads of more than one of the characters. I could do that as an omniscient narrator, but that puts too much distance between the reader and the characters, so I choose to do multiple first person narrators. I enjoy working this way, although there were so many voices in *What's In a Name* that I was nervous about being able to make them all unique. I wrote that book FAST because I was so afraid I'd forget something about one character as I was writing the next—I wanted to get it all down on paper while it was in my head. For me, the multiple voices make the writing more fun.

**DG:** Well, you were successful. One of the things that members of my book discussion group praised the most about *What's In a Name* was how individual each character sounded. Their voices were really different from one another. On the other hand, we all wished that you had developed the characters more—we wanted to know more about every one of those kids. But I guess with so many characters, there wasn't room enough to expand on each of them.

**EW:** I felt that way too. For the structure of this book, however, I felt that I had to keep each

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character to one chapter, allowing them to reappear here and there in other narrator's chapters, but there were a few of them I really wanted to follow in more depth. Georgie, for instance, I felt I could do a whole book on. And I loved Ricardo too. O'Neill wanted to go on and on. Who knows, maybe I'll come back to some of them another time.

**DG:** What about divorce? Divorce and dysfunctional families play a major role in *Noticing Paradise* and, especially, in *Hard Love*. John's mother, in fact, is probably one of the coldest mothers in all of YA fiction—not only doesn't she hug her son, she goes out of her way to avoid touching him! Is there some element of autobiography in that experience? What caused you to make that such an important part of *Hard Love*?

**EW:** It's true that my family was never very physical with each other and it's something I've tried to change with my own family, but no one was ever as cold as John's mother. I didn't start out with this idea—it wasn't until I had the two of them together in the kitchen the first time and I had to figure out what the problem was between them that led to John's inability to reach out to people that suddenly I just SAW that his mother couldn't touch him. It was one of the few times when my characters told me what the problem was. And once I knew that about the mother, the whole story fell into place for me. She is cold, but I hope not unsympathetic. A screwed-up lady, but someone who is trying to get better.

**DG:** She does show some promise in the end. Please tell us a little about *Gracie's Girl*.

**EW:** *Gracie's Girl* is a middle-grade book, narrated by 11-year-old Bess. She and her best friend Ethan (I always like to have both sexes as main characters even when there's no "romance") become involved with the soup kitchen Bess's very busy parents help run. Bess is less enthusiastic about this volunteer work than Ethan until they meet Gracie, a slightly batty elderly woman who eats out of Dumpsters and sleeps on a loading dock. She becomes their cause and they become her lifeline.

**DG:** Then of course there's *Razzle*, a novel about an unusual girl who works at the Truro dump on Cape Cod. I thought you captured the Cape setting very well. But the book I want most for you to comment on is *The Long Night of Leo and Bree*, the offbeat and suspenseful story of a teenage boy whose sister was brutally murdered and the wealthy girl whom he kidnaps. What promoted you to create that bizarre conflict?

**EW:** I've had the basic story rambling around in my head for years. A good friend of mine was, years ago, abducted in New York City. There was no basement involved and neither she nor her abductor were 17, but she did remember advice she'd once heard about "making yourself real" and it saved her life. As a matter of fact the guy, once he'd decided he wasn't, in fact, going to

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kill her and throw her in the East River, drove her back to a "safe neighborhood" before letting her out of his car. I was always amazed by the story and the idea of making yourself real—and it occurred to me that that is what people do when they fall in love with someone—they let down their barriers and make themselves real. So I wanted to play with that kind of intimacy between these two very different characters.

**DG:** Well, you certainly did that convincingly. The alternative points of view of Bree and Leo really reveal their fears and feelings through the horrifying night they spend together. The book is intense, frightening, and insightful. Do you usually have to think a long time about the topics you write about, or do some just pop up unexpectedly?

**EW:** Sometimes one, sometimes the other. I love when a topic just announces itself and demands to be used, but sometimes there just isn't one available and you have to work to find something.

**DG:** What's the most difficult part of writing for you?

**EW:** Beginnings are hard, when the options are wide open and the pages are blank. I procrastinate getting started because I know that's the hardest work for me. Also, it's difficult knowing when the book is finished. Is there more work I could do on it to make it better? Or am I just putting in unnecessary junk now and obscuring the story?

**DG:** What's the most satisfying thing for you about being a writer?

**EW:** The most satisfying thing is when I've had a very good working day and I feel like I've really captured something: a character, a voice, a mood, a place. I feel stiff and sore from sitting in one position for so long, but even that seems to mean I've gotten lots accomplished—a feeling I love.

**DG:** Yeah, that's always a good feeling. Of the various honors you and your books have received, which do you value the most?

**EW:** Well, the [Michael Printz Honor Award](#) was certainly a wonderful surprise, especially because this is the first year the award has been given. Just the fact that this award exists is validating. And to be honored by librarians—who read everything—is fabulous. But I think I was even more moved by winning the Lambda Literary Award this year. The Lambda is for a children's or young adult book having to do with the gay or lesbian experience. Because I'm not gay myself I had some worries about whether my lesbian character in *Hard Love* would be acceptable to the gay community. I worried if I had really gotten her down right—whether she really "worked." Getting the Lambda Award felt like the answer to my questions.

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With Printz winners Laurie Halse Anderson and Walter Dean Myers at ALA 2000.

**DG:** When you are not writing, what kinds of things do you like to do? What's your favorite way to relax?

**EW:** Well, reading, of course, but that's partly work too. I love photography, though I no longer develop my own pictures. My husband says I only love traveling because it gives me different things to photograph, and he's partly right. I like gardening too—especially in the spring—once the weather gets hot and sticky I tend to want to give up on it and just sit in the shade drinking iced tea. I'm also a big fan of contemporary folk music and independent films. I would also go to see plays all the time if it wasn't so expensive.

**DG:** What are the most interesting travel experiences you've had?

**EW:** My husband and I love to travel and there are many spots in this country we enjoy greatly, especially New Mexico and the Pacific Northwest. But we've also had a number of wonderful trips outside this country. The Galapagos Islands were part of a great 3-week trip to [Ecuador](#) which also included a week in the mountains outside Quito and a week in Guayaquil on the coast with members of a family my husband David had lived with 30 years before on a high school semester abroad. There were many amazing moments on this trip, but meeting up with

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the large, friendly family he'd known so long ago was a highlight.



In Venice, Italy, 1996.

One of our favorite spots is Italy—we took our children there four years ago for a three-week driving tour of the north from [Venice](#) through Verona to the Cinque Terre on the Mediterranean coast and down to Florence and Tuscany. It was so much fun to introduce them to a country we'd "discovered" 20 years before. Venice was probably the biggest hit with everyone, the gondolas, the twisty, little streets and canals, the bridges, the gelati!

**DG:** That sounds wonderful. Have you been doing many school visits? Of what value are they to you?

**EW:** To tell you the truth, I do very few school visits. I did some after *Lombardo's Law* came out and found them somewhat frustrating. I tend to put a lot of time into any public appearance, but often the school hasn't put any time into it—the kids aren't even familiar with the books. And now, since my newer books are really for older teenagers, I get very few invitations to schools. What I enjoy is the contact with the kids, but when you're facing a room of sixty people you don't have much real contact anyway. It's very time consuming and I would personally rather spend my time writing.

**DG:** I know how maddening that can be when you go to a school where the kids haven't read any of your books and have no idea why you are there. Teachers and librarians need to prepare their students better when they invite a writer to visit. But you do have contact with students, because they send you letters, yes? What is it that kids comment about most in their letters?

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**EW:** The characters—which ones reflect their own lives and how. They tell me I've written about their own school, their own friends, and that's very gratifying.

**DG:** Nice. As a result of your focus on zines in *Hard Love*, have a lot of kids been sending you their own zines?

**EW:** I have gotten a few from kids, but I'm surprised at the number of teenagers who tell me they'd never heard of zines before reading *Hard Love*. Actually a lot of them tell me they now plan to do a zine of their own.

**DG:** From a teacher's point of view, as well as a writer's, that's an excellent response. Now that you've introduced a lot of readers (and their teachers as well) to zines, what else do you hope to bring to this exciting genre that maybe other authors haven't?

**EW:** Hard question. I hope I capture a reality that teenagers recognize. I hope my characters think and speak the way real teenagers do—and yet, I also want to surprise my readers a little. I want ideas to sneak up on them. And I hope I can deal with certain difficult topics—for example, homosexuality—in a more straightforward manner than many books have in the past.

**DG:** As a straight person, why is homosexuality a topic you want to deal more with?

**EW:** Even though there are more YA books with gay characters published now, it's still not a regular occurrence to have a gay character unless the book is about that person's coming out or problems with his/her homosexuality. I think there are so many gay kids—still scared, still hiding who they are, still at risk—that we need many more books with gay characters so they can see themselves reflected in literature. I've always had a number of gay and lesbian friends and I think I have some understanding of the trauma many of them went through as teenagers, so it's become an important issue for me to address.

**DG:** I see. How much of the writings of other YA authors do you read? Who among your colleagues do you admire most and why?

**EW:** I read as much as I can, although I've always been a slow reader. The first YA author I read and loved was Brock Cole and although I have many other favorites now, his work, especially *Celine*, remains among my most loved. The thing I love about Cole are his unusual characters, never predictable, always funny and poignant. I'm also a big fan of M.E. Kerr who also comes up with great, wry characters. I loved Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade* and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, and all the Chris Crutcher books. They put their characters in peril, but they love them too—they write books filled with warmth. The book I've most recently read and loved is Lori Aurelia Williams' *When Kambia Elaine Flew In From Neptune*. Again,

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great characters, but also the most fluid, lovely writing that just floats you through this marvelous book. I've always been a big Lois Lowry fan too—oh, there are just too many!

**DG:** If you were sixteen years old and could see yourself as you are now, what would you think of yourself?

**EW:** I would be very happy, but amazed, I think, that I'd actually made it out of Belleville, Illinois, and so FAR away. I would be surprised and a little sad that I don't paint anymore, but I'd be thrilled to have become a writer.

**DG:** What advice can you give to teachers about how they should teach literature and writing?

**EW:** I wish more high school teachers taught contemporary teen novels interspersed with the classics. I think they'd manage to keep more kids interested in reading—even the brightest kids zone out at [A Tale Of Two Cities](#), followed by [Silas Marner](#) and [The Scarlet Letter](#). Even *Catcher In The Rye* seems pretty dated today (though Salinger is a favorite of mine). Teachers need to keep up with the best in YA fiction! As to teaching writing, the best you can do is have them do it a lot—sometimes on a specific topic and sometimes with a free rein. Not too much criticism. For some kids it's painful and for some it will be a joy.

**DG:** Good advice, thanks. More advice: If I'm fourteen years old and I like to write and I think I might like to be a professional writer when I grow up, what advice can you give me?

**EW:** Read, read, read. Then write, write, write. Get together with other people who write and discuss your work with them. Don't give up. It takes a long time to do your apprenticeship as a writer. Just because you know somebody who published their first book at eighteen doesn't mean most people do. If you can't stand rejection and criticism, maybe you better find something else to do.

**DG:** What age are you, inside your head?

**EW:** I used to think I was about thirteen, but in recent years I believe I've grown to about sixteen. I hope I never get older!

**DG:** Last question: What are you working on now? What can you tell us about it?

**EW:** I'm just finishing work on a book which I'm pretty sure will be called Zigzag. The protagonist is a girl whose longtime boyfriend is leaving for the summer and then for college in the east. She's a year younger than he is, with no clear plans for her life, except to hold on to him. Because he's gone for the summer anyway, she accepts the offer of her recently-widowed aunt to help her drive from Iowa to California, a zigzag trip to see the country, and to try to repair

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some of the damage their father's death has done to her two cousins, ages 13 and 10. Like most journeys, the trip holds surprises that change everyone.

**DG:** Oooh. Sounds interesting. I'll be looking forward to reading that novel. Thanks for your interesting responses.

### **The Latest News--October 10, 2002**

**DG:** What have you been working on since Leo and Bree?

**EW:** Well, Zigzag will be out next summer, and I'm currently finishing another YA too, this one written completely in letters, e-mails, postcards and Instant Messages. The biggest thing in my life right now is getting ready to spend December in South Africa (Cape Town and environs) where my daughter is going to school this semester. Can't wait!

**DG:** You can tell us about South Africa as well as about your newest book the next time we talk. Thanks.

### **The Latest News—June 28, 2003**

**DG:** How was South Africa?

**EW:** South Africa was fabulous. I put pictures and a little verbiage on my website—[www.ellenwittlinger.com](http://www.ellenwittlinger.com)—if you want to go see. If not for the hideously long plane ride to get there, I'd go back a.s.a.p. Gorgeous country, very friendly people.

**DG:** Zigzag is about to be published, so we'll get to read that soon. What's the status of the novel you mentioned that's written completely in letters, e-mails, postcards, and Instant Messages?

**EW:** That's titled *Heart on My Sleeve*. It will be out next summer--2004. I'm excited about it, as are the folks at Simon & Schuster.

## The Latest News—October 29, 2003

**DG:** In your latest novel, *Zigzag*, Robin is such an interesting young woman. Why did you choose to make her a farm girl from Iowa and not someone from New England where you live?

**EW:** I grew up in the Midwest, in Illinois, and went to graduate school in Iowa for two years. I'm still very fond of that prairie country, which has a subtle beauty not always recognized even by those who live there. I think Midwesterners often grow up with an inferiority complex about living "nowhere" because both coasts assert such influence on this country. And Robin herself has pretty low self-esteem as the book begins--she feels not really worthy of her richer, more sophisticated boyfriend. So, I guess it was just time to go back to my roots.

**DG:** I see. This novel joins a growing list of journey books where the characters not only learn about the world but, more importantly, come to understand more about their own inner strengths. Robin and her aunt and cousins cover a lot of territory in this book. Before you wrote the novel, did you go to all those places yourself?

**EW:** I have visited a number of those places, particularly all the Southwest destinations--my husband and I really love it there. I've also done some mosquito-y camping in South Dakota and driven across country a few times. There were, however, several places I wasn't as familiar with, so I checked Internet sites and travel books to get a feeling for what it would be like to be there, but when there are lots of details it means I saw the place firsthand.

**DG:** Although I thought the correspondence between Robin and her boyfriend, who is spending the summer in Italy, was a valuable part of the story, the most interesting parts for me were the scenes between Robin and her two younger cousins who were scrapping all the time. In fact, I've never read anything else where siblings were fighting that was nearly as vivid as those scenes in this novel. Fantastic job! Were your own children that vicious with each other when they were young, or did you use some other models for that kind of behavior?

**EW:** Interesting question, Don. I don't know WHERE they came from. Thank goodness, my own two kids got along quite well, but over the years I have had occasion to see kids at their worst from time to time. Especially in a high-stress situation such as the death of a parent, kids can react very angrily. While I was in college I worked for a year at a center which housed adolescents in crisis--maybe I'm channeling some of those kids here.

**DG:** Wherever they came from, those scenes are excellent. Is there anything else you would like to tell readers about this novel?

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**EW:** I've wanted to do a "journey" book for a while now. Even though it's been done before, traveling is more than just a metaphor--it's such a potent catalyst for change in people. It has been for me and I see it affect my children similarly. It's exciting to write about places you love.

**DG:** Yeah, I love that kind of story, too. About your other work, you indicated earlier that *Heart on My Sleeve* is in production. So what have you been working on recently?

**EW:** I'm working on a novel tentatively titled *The Walker*, which concerns a rather mysterious boy who seems always to be walking around the small town of Hammond, and his interactions with the narrator, a girl named Sandpiper who has more problems than just her name. That's all the clues you get for now!

**DG:** Okay. We'll wait expectantly for further installments. Thank you.

For more information about Ellen Wittlinger, go to [www.ellenwittlinger.com](http://www.ellenwittlinger.com).

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