**KELLY WRITERS HOUSE**

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**SENSIBLE NONSENSE PROJECT**

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**My Favorite Childhood Book: *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler***

**by Melissa Stoller**

Hi Everyone! I’m Melissa Stoller. I’m delighted to be included in this panel discussion. I have a special attachment to the Kelly Writers House. As most of you know, Zoe Stoller is my daughter and she came to Penn because of the Writers House. It’s truly special for me to be here tonight.

I love being immersed in the world of children’s books and I’m happy to speak about my favorite childhood book, ***From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler***, written by E. L. Konigsburg. I especially enjoy sharing about books because I’m a children’s book author. My first chapter book, *The Enchanted Snow Globe Collection: Return to Coney Island*, was released this summer by Clear Fork Publishing. And I have three books releasing soon: *The Enchanted Snow Globe Collection – Book Two: The Liberty Bell Train Ride*; *Scarlet’s Magic Paintbrush*; and *Ready, Set, GOrilla!* The books I read as a child definitely helped inform my work as a writer. In fact, I just re-read *From* *the Mixed-Up Files*. I was as engrossed as ever, and I really appreciated reading the story now with a writer’s eye.

Reflecting on why I love ***From the Mixed-up Files*** so much, I realize it’s because the book is a multi-layered story involving secrets. And I love secrets. Thinking about it now, I’m not surprised that my other favorite book growing up was *A Secret Garden*. I live in New York City, and I often visit a beautiful tribute to *The Secret Garden* author, the Frances Hodgson Burnett Memorial Fountain in New York’s Conservatory Gardens.

Secrets abound in ***From the Mixed-Up Files***. The story centers around Claudia and Jamie Kincaid, a brother and sister from Greenwich, CT, who run away to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. There, they encounter a small statue named Angel that may be a Michelangelo marble. To learn the truth about Angel, they must seek out the reclusive Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, who herself is a collector of secrets. The unraveling of all the secrets and mysteries in the book makes it a compelling read for children and adults alike.

**As for me, I don’t have many secrets of my own. Except maybe I do have a few secret thoughts, secret places, and secret wishes.**

**First, my secret thought** was that this book – my favorite book growing up – was my own discovery. I read it several times as a young girl, and my parents took me quite often to the Met Museum, where we would recreate all the scenes that the author describes, including lunch in the glorious fountain restaurant that is now the renovated Greek and Roman Galleries. To me, this was MY book. At the time, I didn’t grasp the enormity of the acclaim that the book received, including The Newbery Medal for distinguished contribution to American literature for children. As an adult, I read it with my three daughters and created a museum treasure hunt to find all the Met references. And I even wrote a parent-child book club discussion guide about the book. Little did I realize as a child that my favorite book would become a movie starring Ingrid Bergman and a television movie starring Lauren Bacall, and that the Met Museum would create a MuseumKids tour brochure (“The Mixed-up Files” Issue) focused on the book. And, just this summer, the MET organized a 50th anniversary Mixed-up Files celebration. But when I was a girl, this was simply “my favorite book” for many reasons. Here are just a few:

***From the Mixed-Up Files* has everything a great book should have:**

\* The **characters** are multi-dimentional and have unique voices:

Claudia was cautious, curious, and didn’t like injustice. She liked to plan details and was thorough. She likes being waited on. She wanted to be appreciated and feel special.

Jamie was adventurous and liked complications. He cheated at cards, was good at managing money, and was rich.

\* The main character had a **well-defined goal**: Claudia says she wants to be different when she goes back home. And she achieves her goal. As Mrs. Frankweiler says, “Simply because [Claudia has] a secret, it will enable her to return to Greenwich different.” (p. 149) “Secrets are the kind of adventure [Claudia] needs . . . of course, secrets make a difference. That was why planning the runaway had been such fun; it was a secret. And hiding in the museum had been a secret. But [those secrets] weren’t permanent; they had to come to an end. Angel wouldn’t. [Claudia] could carry the secret of Angel inside her for twenty years just as I had.” (150-51).

\* The **plot** moves the story forward at a fast pace with suspense, action, and a headline-making mystery.

\* The **opening** draws you in. Before Chapter 1, a letter appears from Mrs. Basel E. Frankweiler to her lawyer, Saxonberg (who also has a secret identity). She hints at a mystery, writing, “I’ve spent a lot of time on this file. I listened. I investigated, and I fitted all the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. It leaves no doubts. Well, Saxonberg, read and discover.” And page one starts: “Claudia knew that she could never pull off the old-fashioned kind of running away. . . Therefore, she decided that her leaving home would not be just running from somewhere but would be running to somewhere. To a large place, a comfortable place, an indoor place, and preferably a beautiful place. And that’s why she decided upon the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.” (p. 5) As a New Yorker and art lover, I was hooked.

\* The book is full of **humor**.

For example, Claudia says to Jamie, “You must show the plan to no one. Memorize all the details; then destroy my note.” “Do I have to eat it,” Jamie asked. (p. 17)

And, “[Claudia and Jamie] were surprised that they could actually learn something when they weren’t in class.” (p. 54)

\* The writing is magical. It contains **lyrical language** such as the line describing how the duo made sure they weren’t detected inside the museum: “They waited for miles and miles of time before they came out of hiding.” (p.79) **And the writing is clever**: throughout the story, Claudia corrects Jamie’s grammar every chance she gets, and he responds, “Baloney.” That word is the ultimate clue that leads them to a mixed-up file titled, “Bologna,” that helps unravel the central mystery about Angel.

\* The book has **heart**. In exploring the relationship between brother and sister, the author shows Claudia and Jamie becoming a team, a family of two . . . “You might call it caring. You could even call it love.” (p. 39) This book makes you feel. As I re-read the ending, my eyes brimmed with tears at the beauty and elegance of the conclusion.

\* And as a bonus: **The book is a Love Letter to New York** – the author mentions the Met Museum, the NY Public Library, Central Park, the Automat, Fifth Avenue, Rockefeller Center Skating Rink, Grand Central Terminal, Chock Full of Nuts Coffee Shop, the United Nations, and more. In fact, my edition of the book has an Afterword written in 2002 to commemorate the 35th Anniversary of publication. The author writes, “Since its first publication in 1967, there have been a lot of something-mores that have changed New York City, the Metropolitan Museum, and me,” and she discusses New York at both those junctures in history with as much grace as exhibited in the book.

**So you can see why I loved this book, and why I felt possessive over it as a child, as if it were my own secret discovery.**

**Here’s my second secret: Like Claudia who secretly lived in the Metropolitan Museum, I had a secret place**. **My secret place** was a diner called the Roscoe Diner, in upstate New York. When I was young, I ate lunch there often each summer visiting dear family friends. It was my secret because I wasn’t allowed to eat bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches at home, since my father kept kosher, but we ate them at the Roscoe Diner when my father was back at work in New York City. Except . . . the diner wasn’t really a secret as I discovered much later. Apparently, it was on the road between New York City and my college, Wells College, and also on the way to Cornell, so hundreds of my fellow students talked about stopping at the Roscoe Diner, my not-so-secret place. But to me, as to Claudia, that doesn’t really matter. Because the secretness of the place had already seeped into my pores and my being. And those memories still make me smile. And, like Claudia, the MET is also my secret place. I will always have a love affair with the MET . . . I live about a ten-minute walk away, and I visit and take art history classes there often. In fact, I just saw a Michelangelo exhibit twice and I thought about *From the* *Mixed-Up Files* as I viewed the magnificent sketches, drawings, and marble statues. Were there any mysteries and secrets in this recent exhibit? I certainly hope so.

**And third, I have a secret wish.**

For a long time, I secretly desired to be a children’s book author. I always loved reading and writing. I went to law school and worked as a lawyer, legal writing instructor, early childhood educator, and freelance writer. When my oldest daughter Zoe was born, I tried writing picture books and amassed a file full of rejections. That file certainly wasn’t as interesting as Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler’s file. I concentrated on other types of writing, and I put that secret dream aside until about five years ago, when I started to pursue this secret passion again. And I decided to call myself a children’s book author. I’m proud that I worked hard and persevered to make this secret wish a reality. And when I write my stories I think about the books I loved as a child . . . including *From* *The Mixed-Up Files*, and I use them as mentor texts to guide me in incorporating all the elements of a beautiful story and hopefully some of the magic as well.

Finally, I have **one more extra secret wish** – that one day someone will ask a child what her favorite book is, and one of my books will be at the top of her list.

Thank you!