



“Playing your part”: An Interview with Sarah Guillory

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Abstract

I was granted an interview with [Sarah Guillory](#) with the intention of publishing this in tandem with my article “[After the Flood](#).” The conversation develops many of the themes of the article, especially the author’s belief in the importance of resilience as a trait that will help young people in tackling the climate crisis.

Keywords

Agency, story, innovation, empowerment, home, *Nowhere Better Than Here*

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What prompted you to write *Nowhere Better Than Here*?

Sarah Guillory: I always wanted to write a coastal erosion book. I live and teach in Louisiana and so many people don't know how quickly parts of the state are, basically, disappearing. Then in 2016, Louisiana had a major flood and schools closed for a week. I thought, there's a story in this, about a child coming face-to-face with this disaster and trying to make sense of it all.

What made you want to write about the effects of environmental change on the lives of young people, specifically?

SG: Because unfortunately, they're the ones who are going to have to deal with it. It will be a constant presence in their lives, whereas it was more of a background noise when I was growing up. I remember learning about recycling and there being some concern about acid rain, but kids nowadays are dealing with climate anxiety that is so much more prevalent and, like most anxieties, it's only exacerbated by social media. These kinds of existential issues are in their faces all the time, whereas when we were young, it was more of a fleeting sound bite on the news. I wanted to write about a character living in this uneasy limbo between something that she has no control over, whilst also giving her an outlet, e.g.: planting marsh grass, to enact some degree of agency. That sense of movement and playing your part can help kids from feeling completely helpless. It's so important; not just with the climate, but political engagement as well.

I was really interested in the portrayal of Dr. Nelson in the novel, the environmental scientist who Jillian befriends. Can you discuss your development of this character?

SG: I had one very influential teacher who changed the trajectory of my life and was someone that I wanted to be like. I felt it was important for Jillian to have exposure to this kind of role model, [someone] who could help to guide her thinking on what to do about her predicament. I also wanted it to be someone who got out of a small town but decided to come back. I wanted Dr. Nelson to be an adult who had gone off to university, had studied climate effects in Brazil, who had been to important and interesting places, yet had ultimately returned to her home state and hadn't given up on it. So, this character gave me a way to show Jillian that you can still fight when all seems hopeless, but you also have to believe in your cause and have the interest and resilience to keep going. It was important to have a sense of hope in the novel, that Dr. Nelson characterizes. And it was ultimately important for Jillian to realize that 'hey, I can do this on a much larger scale as I get older— this fight doesn't have to end here'.

Dr. Nelson runs the 'Discovery Center'. This was such a positive and inspiring force for good in the book. How important do you feel community outreach is in inspiring and advocating for greater environmental engagement amongst young people?

SG: I think they're really important. It was also important to me to show a girl from nowhere getting involved in that kind of thing, because I was a girl from nowhere and most of the books that I read growing up were about people from somewhere (usually big cities or Europe), but they were never from the South. I wanted kids like me from working class families to see themselves reflected in literature. To see that they can be part of a solution as well, but again, on a small scale, without making them feel like they necessarily have to do these big grand things to make a difference. The Discovery Center encourages people to share oral stories about the places getting destroyed, about planting grass and things that everyone can do. When I was a kid, we would go camping and fishing, but we would always pick up other people's trash because that's what you did. You were good stewards of the land and you took care of it. I never questioned that; it was all just part of my childhood. Maybe nowadays the importance of treating nature in that way has been slightly forgotten, so I wanted to put that into the story as well. Groups like the Discovery Center in the book can help to teach young people this appreciation and care for the natural world so, yes, they have real importance.

One of the things that struck me about your book was the way you didn't patronise your readers by implying the existence of easy answers. Climate change is a "wicked problem," and your writing reflects this in a way that is neither hopeless seeming nor lacking in cognizance of the overall gravity of the situation. How did you tread this fine line?

SG: I think that you have to have hope. Adults are doing a lot of things to mitigate the effects of climate change, which young people should recognise. Again, the link to mental health is important and optimism about the future is an integral part of that. However, we have basically locked ourselves into a situation where the oil and gas industry down here [in Louisiana] has dug all these channels and caused all of this erosion but has also brought in a lot of money and fed a lot of families in a really poor part of the United States. It's a balance where people are able to eat because they

have jobs in these industries, yet they also do so much damage to the environment. I was doing research for another book about the cypress tree industry because cypress forests are just being devastated. I started crying when I read about one tree they cut down with internal markings that dated it to 1066—the year of the Norman invasion of Britain. I was just like, “are you kidding me!” Climate change is so complicated because there are all these moving parts relating to science, ecology, industry, etc. and they’re never quite in sync with each other. Children need to understand how complex an issue this is. Fiction can be a great way of teaching this.

Resilience is a key issue in *Nowhere Better Than Here* and Jillian gradually learns this trait through her partnership with Dr. Nelson. Why do you think resilience is so important for young people, especially if they wish to play an active role in tackling climate change?

SG: Resilience is key because this issue is not going to be fixed overnight. It's something I worry about very much with my students. They are no longer comfortable with the “productive struggle”, and I don't blame them. I tell my students over and over that you have to sit in that uncomfortable place and experience struggle—this is what learning *is*. Yet, they live in a world of immediate gratification with iPhones and social media etc. so they are hugely uncomfortable with the idea that the process of achieving things can be worthwhile in itself. Instead, they want to race to the outcome. This attitude is deeply problematic when it comes to dealing with climate change, because it's not like there'll be a moment when we just say “it's done—it's solved”; it will be constant slogging away to make incremental change. The way I think about it and teach it is that writing, running (my other love), and climate change are the same as any big problem: showing up in small ways every single day. Kids have to learn that but it's hard because they see so many polished things online. Everything is polished, everything looks like it works out and they don't see the *process* to it. So there are going to be setbacks. There are going to be times when it feels like what you're doing is accomplishing absolutely nothing. Yet you have to keep coming back and standing back up and doing it again and again. I always say that hard work beats talent pretty much every single time. I have seen that academically and I have seen that in other ways. People who show up and keep showing up are the ones who achieve great

things. I think that with climate change this process of keeping on showing up is not just going to help kids change things, but ultimately also help them be happy. I want them to find that balance and joy between fighting for what you believe in and just living in that joy; just living in that joy of existing. All that is going to take resilience.

Why do you think fiction can be such an important tool for teachers to use to engage young people with the climate crisis in the classroom?

SG: Young people need to see themselves in literature, to fall in love with literature, and to know that they are not alone. I think that is so important, and it's especially true with climate literature. Any time you're talking about tough things, fiction is a safe way to explore something because you can look at it as fiction when things get really scary. You can have these very real conversations where not everybody in the classroom has to know that you're going through something personally; it's the *character* that is going through this and you can share in their feelings safely. Also, throughout my whole life, fiction has fired me up about things that were important, like recycling and ocean pollution, and it's the same now. Plus, there are great cross-curricular things you can pull in: you've got literature and you've got English, but you've also got the sciences, history, oral histories, and the history of place. They're all interconnected, and climate literacy books are able to show children this. You can explore so much more through fiction and also empathise with things so much more easily than is possible with non-fiction.

Have you had any notable responses from readers or teachers about the book?

SG: A middle school in Baton Rouge has chosen my book for the whole middle school to read. They're also going on a field trip to see erosion and visit scientists, so that's really exciting. It shows that the book is capable of encouraging that bridge between story and real life. The book was also chosen by the state of Louisiana to represent it at the National Book Festival in Washington DC. They had a poster of my book up and there was a little girl with her parents, and she pointed to the book, and she was like, "I read that book." I told her I'd written it, and we talked about it. She said that it wasn't an assigned book for class and that she had chosen it herself. We then talked about Jillian, although her favourite character was the dog (everyone loves that dog!).

Finally, what is the topic of your next book and when will it be released?

SG: On the topic of dogs, my next book is about the relationship between a little girl and her bloodhound. However, similarly to *Nowhere Better Than Here*, the book is also about her figuring out what home is and how the nature of home changes over time. All my stories are very much about family and home because I'm a homebody and I keep gravitating back to those themes. However, I'm hoping to return to more of the environmental stuff in the book after this one.