

A note from
FRANNY BILLINGSLEY



The story behind *The Robber Girl* begins with a dollhouse and ends with a book. It was not a regular dollhouse, not one you could buy in a store. My father built it for my daughter when she was six. He modeled it on the house where my mother grew up, which was also the house where I grew up, which was also the house where my daughter grew up. He fashioned the arched Italianate windows, the green clapboarding, the spiral staircase. The house was a labor of love, and although my father is gone, the love still lingers.

After my father made the dollhouse, I knew I'd write my own dollhouse story; I knew that my fictional dollhouse would be a miniature version of the house in which my protagonist lives. But I couldn't find the heart of the story, until I read *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard. It was this that jump-started *The Robber Girl*. In it, Bachelard says, "If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."

Ah! Now I knew who my protagonist had to be. She's a child with no memory of dreaming spaces. She knows only the cavernous hideout of the robber band that adopted her. There are no intimate spaces. And so, when the robber band is dispersed and she finds herself living in a cottage, she cannot help but be drawn to those intimate spaces that shape our dreams and memories: a bed in a cupboard, a door that locks, a key in a drawer, a dollhouse replica of the human-sized cottage.

The dollhouse in particular stirs her imagination. In it lives a pair of dolls who want her to fill its empty spaces. At first, she rejects their requests, as "taming." As her sidekick, the dagger, likes to remind her, she must never allow herself to be tamed.

She discovers that sometimes you can experience a smaller space more clearly than a larger space. As Bachelard says, "The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it."

The Robber Girl gradually takes possession of this small space. Sometimes I had to force her—she resists the possibility she's being tamed. Bachelard says that one of the things we prize most highly is immobility, so I gave the Robber Girl a blizzard, forcing her into immobility—into rest, into a dreaming space.

"Baudelaire declares that dreamers like a severe winter," says Bachelard.

So the Robber Girl learns to dream. She learns about thresholds and locks. She learns about wardrobes stuffed with memories and drawers filled with keys. She learns to keep them full. She fills the empty spaces of the dollhouse and ends up filling her own empty spaces. And like my father, she turns the dollhouse into a labor of love and, in so doing, turns away from the robber band and toward a new family.



Photo by Miranda Perrenjili

FRANNY BILLINGSLEY is the highly acclaimed author of three fantasy novels—National Book Award Finalist *Chime*, *Boston Globe–Horn Book Award* winner *The Folk Keeper*, and *Well Wished*—as well as a picture book, *Big Bad Bunny*, illustrated by G. Brian Karas. She lives in Chicago.



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