



## Q&A with Author Gennifer Choldenko

*In September 2007, Gennifer's newest novel, If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period, will be published by Harcourt. Bridging middle grade and teen readers, the book is told from the viewpoints of two students at Mountain School, Kirsten and Walker. The year holds surprises for them both. Quercus, Winding Oak's ezine, asked Gennifer about her new book:*

**Q. Where did you get the idea for *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period*?**

A. I began with two things: one was a strong sense of the character: Kirsten and the other was a story of racial injustice that happened at a local private school. Though I didn't use the story in my novel, the incident horrified and obsessed me. But the more I worked on the novel, the more my own seventh grade experience began to come into play.

**Q. What was the incident?**

A. It was a traffic accident which occurred on the grounds of a private school in Northern California. A crazy rich white woman was allowed to park illegally at the school because of her infamously bad driving habits and famously large donations. One day she backed her ginormous SUV smack into a Hispanic woman's brand new car in front of dozens of people and then drove off without stopping. When confronted, the crazy white woman said she didn't stop because the Hispanic woman was obviously an illegal immigrant who would probably try to extort money from her by claiming that existing dings on her car were caused by the accident.

**Q. What happened in seventh grade?**

A. I was bussed to a predominantly black junior high after attending a mostly white elementary school. I'd never really thought about my skin color until the day I got off the bus for my first day in seventh grade. Everywhere I went at that school I was first my skin color and then who I was. I hated having to prove myself, having to overcome whatever people thought of my skin color, having to be my skin color first and then who I was. It wasn't lost on me then, nor is it now, that that's how many Americans feel every day.

**Q. The mothers in *Tree Falls* are fascinating minor characters—how deeply do you imagine characters while you're writing?**

A. I find mom characters are especially fun to write. Partly this is because I am a mom. I have a son who is 12 and a daughter who is seven, and I am in the thick of the mom world. I spend a lot of time thinking about (okay, worrying about) what my children need from me and how I can help them grow into confident and compassionate adults. But I also find writing moms interesting because I didn't have much of a relationship with my own mom. When I write I fantasize about what it might be like to have had this kind of a mom or that kind.



In *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* I decided to see if I could create a strong healthy mother in Walk's mom, Sylvia. Sylvia certainly makes mistakes as a mom. She makes a huge blunder in the book as a matter of fact. But even so, I really felt like she was a tough, honest, and loving mother – the kind of mother I aspire to be.

Rachel, Kirsten's mom, was harder to write because there were parts of Rachel I had very little sympathy for. As a novelist you have to love your characters – even when they do or say despicable things. I finally figured out a way into Rachel, when I realized that despite her limitations she truly loved her kids and her husband.

**Q. Is the Mountain School in *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* based on a real school?**

A. No. Mountain School is not based on a real school. I love the teacher Mr. Balderis though and I wish he were real.

**Q. Who were the teachers, like Mr. Balderis, who inspired you to be a more involved student?**

A. I was always a very involved student. Because my home life was chaotic and difficult, I found school to be a haven. School was intriguing on an intellectual level and it was the place where the world made sense. People make fun of the quote: *It takes a village to raise a child* but for me those words are really true. I was raised by my teachers more than I was raised by my family.

And I had many, many terrific teachers: Mrs. Helfand, Miss Brockie, Mrs. Gangsei, Mr. Llwelyn, Mrs. Campbell, Mrs. Rosenthal, Meredith Bullock, Nancy Turrill, Joann Postel – the list goes on and on. None of my teachers were exactly like Mr. Balderis, partly because Mr. Balderis is very much a product of current times and when I grew up there was a different zeitgeist. Actually, a little of Mr. Balderis was inspired by a librarian I know. I borrowed a piece of his soul for Balderis.

**Q. Bullying plays a big part in your work. Why do you suppose you write so much about this?**

A. I am fascinated by what motivates a person to bully. How a bully learns to bully interests me. And most especially I'm intrigued by how a bully rationalizes his or her own behavior to himself or herself.

**Q. You have very unusual titles for your books. How did you come up with the title: *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period*?**

A. Titles are important to me. As I see it, a title must act as a billboard for a book attracting you to it, but once you are finished reading, you experience the title in a different way. A really good title has a twist to it.

I came up with the title *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* the good old-fashioned way: sweat and graphite. I wrote 32 pages of titles for this novel.



**Q. Care to share any of the titles that didn't make the cut?**

A. For a long time the book was called *Middle School Will Eat You Alive*.

**Q. Which brings us to the topic of middle school: why do you suppose you write novels for fourth through eighth graders?**

A. People ask me this a lot. And I always tell them the same thing. I write for this age group because inside I am twelve years old. I can't write YA because I'm not that old yet. Writing for adults seems altogether too boring.

**Q. What was the most challenging part of this novel?**

A. For me, the most challenging part of the novel was having the guts to write it. Nice white girls don't write books like this.

**Q. Where did you get the ideas for your characters?**

A. I get ideas from all kinds of places. The character Jamal came partly from an experience I had doing a school visit. At this particular school, my presentation was given in the library. Because the library was tiny and the school was quite large, the librarian decided only two kids from each class could attend. After I finished the presentation, a kid came up to me and asked me to autograph a scrap of paper. During lunch with the teachers I learned the kid had immediately gone back to his class and tried to sell my autograph. One of the teachers commented that this particular kid would sell the shoes off your feet. I put a little of that kid in Jamal.

**Q. Did you know intelligent kids like Walk when you were in school – kids who weren't afraid to show their intelligence?**

A. Absolutely.

**Q. At what point in the writing process did the tree occur to you as a symbol of family continuity?**

A. The tree came late in the revision of this book. When the idea occurred to me it was inchoate. I didn't really understand where it was coming from, but I had this hunch it was somehow relevant to the book. Much of writing novels is like feeling your way in a pitch black room. It isn't an intellectual process so much as it is intuitive.

**Q. Your last novel, *Al Capone Does My Shirts* was historical fiction set in 1935 on Alcatraz Island but this new novel is contemporary fiction set in Mill Valley. What made you decide to write a contemporary novel?**

A. Actually I started writing *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* long before *Al Capone Does My Shirts* came out. I began developing ideas for *Tree Falls* in 2001, right before my first novel, *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, came out. At the time I had written a first draft of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* but my editor had not yet made an offer on it. Since *Notes from a Liar and*



*Her Dog* was getting so many strong early reviews, I thought I would write another contemporary novel.

**Q. One of the main characters, Kirsten, struggles with an eating disorder. Is this a problem you have?**

A. I did when I was Kirsten's age. I struggled with an eating disorder until I turned thirty. In fact, I recently ran into someone I knew as a child—a person I hadn't seen since I was 21. The first thing she said to me was: "Oh my God, you're not fat!" Now I have to watch my weight, but I don't have an eating disorder. There's a really big difference between my behavior around food now and the way it used to be.

**Q. In *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* Kirsten's mom sends her to a therapist to help her with her weight. Is this what happened to you?**

A. Well first off, I should say that I'm not Kirsten. My upbringing could not have been more different than hers. I did not go to private school. My mother worked full time. She did not volunteer at my school, nor did she care a whit what anyone thought about pretty much anything. My mother didn't care how much I weighed and she didn't know I had an eating disorder. But I knew I had an eating disorder and I tried everything I could think of to cure it. I did hypnosis, weekly injections of the urine of pregnant women, Weight Watchers and many different kinds of therapy. In the end, what helped me was a really good therapist and a twelve-step program.

Enjoy reading *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period!*