

# TRACEY BAPTISTE

on writing

# THE JUMBIES

## Once upon a time, I fell in love with a book.

It was a book of Grimm’s fairy tales, and it was heavy and thick and beautifully illustrated. Inside were stories like “Clever Hans” (who wasn’t actually clever) and “The Brave Tailor” (who was really a liar) and “Snow White,” “Cinderella,” “Rapunzel,” and “King Thrushbeard.” I read that book over and over. I had other books of fairy tales, but this was my favorite.

I, a small, brown, Trinidadian girl, with big eyes and thick black hair that fell in braids down my back, looked nothing like the pale-skinned, light-haired characters in the book. Still, their stories felt as much a part of my life as the ones my family told me of the soucouyant who shed her skin at night, or the douen with their backward feet who might lure me into the forest if I wasn’t careful. All these stories thrilled me, and made me feel adventurous, terrified, and alive. I loved how Snow begged the huntsman for mercy and took her chances in the forest. I pitied Hans for squandering his wealth. I bristled at King Thrushbeard’s nerve in fooling his new bride. I pulled my blanket up over my head at night to escape the soucouyant, and carefully went to my mother if I heard my name at twilight, just in case it might be a douen.

When my mother moved my brother and me to New York, I inexplicably left my favorite book of fairy tales behind. Maybe I thought it was too heavy. Maybe I felt certain that it would always be there for me as it had been for as long as I could remember. But when I returned to Trinidad a year later, the book was gone.



## TRACEY BAPTISTE

lived in Trinidad until she was fifteen; she grew up on jumbie stories and fairy tales. She is a former teacher who works as a writer and editor and lives in New Jersey. *The Jumbies* is her first middle-grade novel. Her website is [www.traceybaptiste.com](http://www.traceybaptiste.com).

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And so the search began.

I already could not resist a bookstore, but now I was on the hunt to replace my beloved fairy tales. Even though nothing I saw came close, I still amassed a collection of stories—several Cinderellas, many Snow Whites, and anthologies of Grimm’s and Andersen’s stories which were as thick as dictionaries, and, sadly, equally free of pictures. But I also missed the stories that I heard as a child, the ones that were never in books. Where were the soucouyant and the douen? So when I came across a book of folktales from around the world, I could not resist it. Inside there were no stories from Trinidad, but there was one from Haiti, called “The Magic Orange Tree.” It rivaled even the best Cinderella story because this girl was ordinary. She wasn’t born to wealth or privilege. She was an average little girl who faced the loss of her mother and the bitterness of her stepmother with courage and cleverness. Instead of a glass slipper, she had an orange. Instead of a fairy godmother, she had only a song and a strong will.

I claimed that story and promised to write it my own way someday, with a girl who looked just like I did when I was little. But stories like that, ones that have lived for ages in the hearts and minds of people who have told them over and over again, are not easy to reshape. They are stubborn and resistant, willing only to give way to the tiniest of changes, and defy all attempts at a wholesale retelling. I learned that you have to be careful with old stories. And you have to take your time.

It was nine years from the time I started writing my version of “The Magic Orange Tree” to the time it was finished and sold. I abandoned the story too many times to count, frustrated with trying to make it work. But it always called me back, just like my book of Grimm’s fairy tales. And so every year or two I would open up the manuscript and work for a few weeks or months, and then stop with the promise never to look at it again. But I always did. Over the years, lots of people read my story. But it wasn’t until someone told me to give up on it that I finally decided not to. I had made a promise to myself. There would be a magical story with a little brown girl with big eyes and thick braids that fell down her back. And she would be brave, and clever, and like all the others, she would win victory over a strange creature and claim her happy ending.

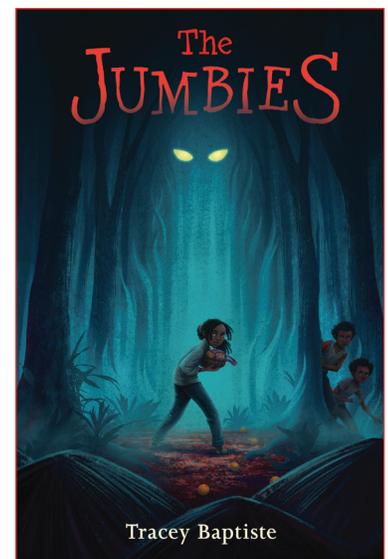
In the end, it was Corinne’s ordinariness that I loved, not the strange creature, or the magic, or even the adventure itself. Corinne did not set out to do the impossible because it had been foretold in prophecy, or because she believed that she was destined for greatness, or because she had been set apart from others and had something to prove. She did not know that she was extraordinary, but she was willing to do extraordinary things to save her family and her friends. We are all like Corinne. We have no idea how extraordinary we are. But in a moment of need, we only have to believe in ourselves to summon up our own deep magic.

I am happy that while searching for some lost fairy tales, I created a new one with a little brown girl with dark braids. And I am happier knowing that even if I lose this book, if every copy ever printed were to suddenly disappear, I could write it again. And again. And again.

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