



I'm going to tell you  
about my superhero.  
His name is Jakeman,  
the Barbed-Wire Boy.  
He looks like a regular kid,  
but he's not.



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# Jakeman

By Deborah Ellis

Mother's Day in prison is no ordinary holiday.

May 2007—Jake and his sister are just two of a busload of inner-city kids, all of them traveling to meet their jailed moms. He's wearing clean underwear beneath his baggy suit—this time—in case the guards feel like searching him again.

For most of these children, there are no other relatives, just the system. Jake and his sister have bounced from foster home to foster home so they know how to watch out for each other. They are lucky they haven't been separated. At least, not yet.

All this is hard on a kid. It's not surprising that Jake spends most of his spare time imagining, dreaming, and drawing comic books. Jakeman is his creation. Jakeman can cover his skin in protective barbed wire. Jakeman's tough. Jakeman can make a difference.

But, is there anything Jake can do? He tries, mailing letter after letter to the governor, asking for his mother to be pardoned. He's just a child, though, ninety-eight pounds soaking wet. Jake can barely get a word in edgewise on his older sister, so how can he get the governor to listen to him?

Yeah, Mother's Day in prison is no ordinary holiday. But, then again, Jake DeShawn is no ordinary kid.

Deborah Ellis is no ordinary writer, either. She is the internationally acclaimed author of such books as *The Heaven Shop*, *Our Stories*, *Our Songs*, and the Breadwinner trilogy. She has been honored with the Governor General's Award, the Vicky Metcalf Award for a body of work, and the Children's Africana Book Award. She has traveled the world and heard the stories of AIDS-stricken children in Africa and Afghan women in refugee camps. Deborah lives in Simcoe, Ontario.

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Jakeman

Ages: 12+ Grades: 7+

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# Excerpt from *Jakeman*:

*Dear Mr. Governor,*

*We learned how to write letters at school. My teacher says you can pardon people out of prison. She says a lot of things, so I checked with Rawlins, who teaches me art at the Boys and Girls Club and has no reason to lie to me. He says it's true, so can you please pardon my mother, Shanice Kiera DeShawn. She's very nice and she didn't do anything wrong and if she did I know she's sorry.*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Jacob Tyrone DeShawn*

*P.S. Write me back. Let me know when she's coming back so I can be ready.*



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# Chronicle: Deborah Ellis

Deborah Ellis grew up in Paris, Ontario. Her interest in humanitarian issues began at a young age and she became a political activist when she was just seventeen. After high school, she moved to Toronto and worked in the Peace Movement and the Women's Movement.

Deborah first gained acclaim as a writer with *Looking for X*, her first novel for young adult readers. It was published in 1999, and it won the Governor General's Award.

In 1997, Deborah travelled to Pakistan to help at an Afghan refugee camp. Out of this experience came *The Breadwinner*, which was published in 2000. It is the story of Parvana, a young Afghan girl who disguises herself as a boy in order to support her family. The novel won both the Manitoba Young Readers' Choice Award and the Hackmatack Award. In 2002, Deborah published the highly acclaimed sequel, *Parvana's Journey*. The book won the prestigious Jane Addams Children's Book Award which is sponsored by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Deborah donated the royalties for both *Parvana's Journey* and *The Breadwinner* to Women for Women in Afghanistan. The following year she completed what is now known as The Breadwinner Trilogy with *Mud City*. The royalties for *Mud City* go to Street Kids International.

While researching another project, Deborah came across the phrase "company of fools." The phrase refers to the small group of people who entertained Black Plague victims in 1348 Paris. Deborah wondered what it would have been like to be a child during that time. *A Company of Fools*, was published by Fitzhenry & Whiteside in 2002. It was a finalist for three children's choice awards: the Silver Birch, the Manitoba Young Readers' Choice and the Rocky Mountain Book Award.

In the summer of 2003 Deborah travelled to Africa and visited Malawi and Tanzania. There, she spent time with children orphaned by AIDS and the people who care for them. Deborah met a young African girl who acted on a radio soap opera that dealt with social issues. That child became the inspiration for Binti Phiri, the protagonist of *The Heaven Shop*. Binti's a fiercely independent young lady determined to reunite with her siblings after their parents die of AIDS. Royalties from the sale of *The Heaven Shop* go to UNICEF.



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# Chronicle: Deborah Ellis

(Continued)

*Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About AIDS*, was also inspired by Deborah's travels to Malawi and Tanzania. In this book, real-life orphans talk about their experiences, nursing their dying parents and caring for their younger siblings. *Our Stories, Our Songs* was named *School Library Journal* Best Book for 2005, and *Book Links* Best New Book for the Classroom 2005.

In her newest book, *Jakeman*, Ellis shifts her focus back to contemporary North America, specifically to children whose mothers have been imprisoned. The story follows a group of inner-city children trekking to a Mother's Day visit at Wickham penitentiary. Again, Deborah focuses on a group of children in a difficult situation, this time on children separated from their families and left to the system.

Deborah says of the characters she creates: "Courage interests me – when we have it, when we don't, and how we make the decision to be brave or cowardly. We have created a world where most children live in some form of war, and I write about them to try to do honour to their strength and courage. I have learned that there is no such thing as 'other people's children.' The world's children are a blessing to all of us. They are also our responsibility."



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# Deborah Ellis—List of Awards

### *Looking for X*

Winner – Governor’s General Award (1999)

### *The Breadwinner*

Winner – Manitoba Young Readers’ Choice Award (2002)

Winner – Hackmatack Award (2002-2003)

### *Parvana’s Journey*

Winner – Jane Addams Children’s Book Award (2003)

### *Mud City*

Winner – Hackmatack Award (2004-2005)

### *Heaven Shop*

Winner – Jane Addams Children’s Book Award (2005)

Winner – Canadian Children’s Book Centre Our Choice (2005)

Winner – Golden Oak Award (2006)

### *A Company of Fools*

Finalist – Silver Birch Award (2004)

Finalist – Manitoba Young Readers’ Choice Award (2004)

Finalist – Rocky Mountain Book Award (2004)

### *Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About Aids*

Winner – *School Library Journal* Best Book (2005)

Winner – *Book Links* Best New Book for the Classroom (2005)

“The Breadwinner Trilogy” (*The Breadwinner, Parvana’s Journey, Mud City*)

Special Commendation from the Jane Addams Peace Association (2004)

Vicky Metcalf Award for Children’s Literature (2005)



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# Sample Interview Questions

- 1) Where did you do your research for *Jakeman*?
- 2) Why children with jailed moms?
- 3) You wrote about children with AIDS in Africa in *The Heaven Shop*. *Jakeman* takes place in the United States yet there is much less awareness of this situation (children with imprisoned mothers). Why do you think there is so little coverage on such children?
- 4) Binti from *The Heaven Shop* was inspired by a little girl that you'd met. Who is the inspiration for Jake?
- 5) When you decide to write about a specific cause, do you get the idea first then meet the children, or do you meet the children then get your idea?
- 6) You meet a lot of impoverished and suffering children. Does it ever feel overwhelming sometimes?
- 7) Most people work nine to five, have families, and barely have enough time to get six hours of sleep a night. But, many of them want to help a cause. Do you have any advice for these people?
- 8) Where should people go, what websites should they visit, to learn more about children in Jake's situation?
- 9) Jake writes for a number of reasons, why do you write?
- 10) After Jake, and you can only pick one, who is your favorite character in the book?



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# Reviews

## Praise for *A Company of Fools*

“...the sudden, devastating changes wrought by the plague on orderly monastic life is ably captured, and middle-graders fascinated by matters medieval will want to add this to their reading list.”

—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

“The voice of Henri, a choir student in the Abbey of St. Luc in 1348, is clear, thoughtful, and sweet as he chronicles the events of the previous year, when the Black Death came to France and when Micah came to the abbey. Brother Bartholomew is always bringing odd things back from his travels, like the muddy stick that became a rose bush, and he brings filthy, noisy Micah too: the boy can sing like an angel. Henri, quiet, bookish, and in love with the order and rule of the abbey, is astonished by Micah, who does as he pleases. Then comes the plague, and Paris is no longer a place of bright wonders. Micah and Henri hatch the idea of singing to cheer the populace, so they become the Company of Fools, providing respite from the constant funeral dirges. What happens to Micah's song, and to Henri, makes a vivid chronicle of monks, good and bad, and intentions, good and bad, set in the horrific context of a plague year. Quicksilver language and strong imagery propel a powerful historical tale.”

—*Booklist*

## Praise for *Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About AIDS*

“The authentic details speak of loss, fear, and grief; incredible kindness; and courage, as well as hope for the future (‘I would wear clean clothes every day and be paid every week’). The readable design includes informative boxed insets (‘How not to catch AIDS,’ ‘Poverty’) and quotes, side-by-side with each child's immediate experience. Readers older than the target audience will want this, too, for both the basic information and the heartrending stories.”

—*Booklist* starred review



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“Every entry is laden with insight, potent with devastating unselfconsciousness. . . This collection should be part of every child’s adolescence, and to my mind, it’s a hands-down winner of the Norma Fleck Award for Canadian Children’s Non-Fiction.”

—*The Toronto Star*

“Heart-wrenching, resilient and inspiring young voices put faces to the African AIDS pandemic.”

—*Today’s Parent*

### Praise for *The Heaven Shop*

“Readers with an interest in faraway places... will cheer at Binti, self-centered and self-important when life is good, learns through adversity and through the model of her grandmother to think and behave more generously.”

—*School Library Journal*

“Ellis packs in a load of information, giving quick flashes of various attitudes and approaches to AIDS—from foolish superstition to valiant confrontation in the form of educational dramas and peer counselling. But Binti’s childish desires and aversions, her slow inner growth, are at the centre of the story, helping to bring together the North American child reader and the startling facts of death and poverty that are tragically common in Binti’s land.”

—*The Toronto Star*



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