KELLEY ON BELLY . . .

What inspired you to write Down in the Belly of the Whale?

Several years ago, I travelled with my boyfriend (now he’s my husband) so he could work the summer at a sports camp in the Berkshire Mountains. We stayed in this little cabin in the woods where I went running (okay, jogging, maybe speed walking) in the mornings and listening to my Walkman. I love eighties music, and one of my favorites is a collection called *Living in Oblivion*. There was a zippy little song on it called “Belly of the Whale” by Burning Sensation, which really struck me. It’s based on the biblical story of Jonah, but the way I heard the song reminded me of most of our own adolescent stories—those feelings of isolation built in to our teenage

years, no matter what groups we’re in or what it looks like to others, that we share as a common condition. The story formed from there, so I’d go from exercise to sitting in that little cabin, forming Harper’s basic story on my laptop.

Are any of the characters based on real people?

Not at all. And yes, of course. What I mean by that is that all of my characters have elements of me and people I know, but each character is a whole new imaginary (but real to me) person, the sum total of an idea I had and everything I learned before she or he was born. For example, Harper’s hives—that’s all me. A super mortifying bodily reaction to stress I have thankfully (mostly) grown out of.

Which character is most like you? Isabel? Harper?

I think Harper is most who I’ve been and Isabel is who I most want to be. I wish I was as cool as Cora is when I was in high school, although I hate what Cora had to go through to become who she is.

Did you do any background research for this book? What personal experiences informed your writing of this YA novel?

The main thing I had to research was the pretext call. I wasn’t sure how Harper could get involved in Cora’s case from a legal standpoint. A cool small town thing is that I directed the District Attorney in a play at my church, and he helped me clarify the legal questions. Thanks, Pete! Personally, I have MS, have had it for a long time and used that personal knowledge. I’ve also learned a lot about acupuncture as an alternative medicine for my MS, and that information, as you’ll see, plays an important part in Harper’s story.