

LAURA RESAU'S WRITING JOURNEY: REFLECTIONS AND ADVICE TO NEW WRITERS

From an Interview with RMC-SCBWI– the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, July 2007

>Q: How did you get interested in writing for children and teens?

The books that have most deeply affected my worldview have been children's books that I read when I was young. I think that kids' concepts of the universe are still very fluid, and a good book can open new realms of existence to them. When I read a fantastical story as a kid, I could very easily lose myself in the book's world-- it permeated the rest of my life. Books are powerful, and their power is magnified when read by young readers.

At the heart of it, though, I don't consciously decide to write for young people—the books simply emerge that way. Although my protagonists are young people, struggling with issues surrounding their place in the world, I've found that many adult readers connect with the stories as well.

>Q: What is the one piece of advice you received that has made the biggest impact?

The ancient poet-philosopher Rumi compared humans to hollow reed flutes—it is only when breath passes through that music is made. When I'm feeling stuck in my writing, I remind myself that I only need to be a hollow reed and let the story come through me. It really takes the pressure off!

>Q: What is the biggest myth about writing/illustrating for children?

In my experience, the biggest myth is that you can approach writing a good book with the rational part of your mind—that you can analyze the market and write a book that will be snatched up because the market is asking for it.

I believe that the most important thing in writing quality children's literature is feeling a passionate need to tell a particular story. In my experience, a novel comes from a very deep, mysterious place (you might conceptualize it as located within your unconscious self or the collective unconscious or God or some higher power...) I feel that creating a novel is a dance between the dream mind and the rational mind—with the dream mind leading.

>Q: What advice would you pass along to a beginner in the industry?

When I was a beginner, my biggest struggle was wondering if I was wasting my time writing, feeling guilty that I didn't have a regular nine to five job, pathetic that I was depending on my husband to pay most of our bills, yet I still couldn't find time to do my share of the dishes or house-cleaning. I was constantly battling doubts, trying to convince myself that I was creating something valuable.

At my times of greatest doubt, one thing that worked well was imagining myself in seventy years, as a very old woman looking back on my life. I let this old woman voice tell me

what mattered most at this time of my life. What mattered was never doing the dishes or cleaning the toilet. What mattered was writing. So, my advice would be to get in touch with the wise old person part of yourself and follow her advice.

I think it's also helpful to have an attitude of gratitude surrounding writing. Again, this goes back to the idea that the story originates in a deeper or higher place, and that it is only passing through you. Feeling grateful helps clear the path for the story to come through.

>Q: What is your writing process/approach? Any rituals? Must have snacks, artifacts, charms?

I write best when the world of dreams feels close. Ideally, first thing in the morning, I stumble out of bed, make some tea with milk and honey, and write my way out of grogginess, still holding on to bits of the dream world. Sometimes I write stream-of-consciousness poetry about some object in my writing room to get me in a creative mood. Sometimes I read a poem (often by Pablo Neruda) and pick out ten random words and use them to create my own poem. Sometimes I put on music that puts me in a creative mood—like Silvio Rodriguez or Lila Downs. And it's always extra inspirational to be surrounded by beauty when I write—colored sea glass and lots of plants and dappled light.

When writing a story, first I just let everything spill onto the page uncensored (sometimes hand-written, usually on the computer), and then I go back and do dozens of revisions.

>Q: What part has SCBWI & the Rocky Mountain Chapter played in your career success?

It's played an enormous role. I attended several of the conferences in Golden during the time I was writing my first book, beginning to publish magazine stories, and eventually sending the manuscript to agents and editors. These conferences gave me all the information I needed to know for all stages of writing and placing the book, and gave me more confidence in my stumbling attempts at net-working (initially painful for a shy, insecure person!)

I found my editor at Delacorte through one of the SCBWI Bulletins. In the publisher's corner area, it said that this editor was new at Delacorte and making exception to the rule about agented submissions only. To my delight, I read that she was interested in magical realism, friendship stories, unusual story-telling devices—all of which my manuscript contained. And to my further delight and amazement, she found my manuscript in the slush pile and took it! (And she's the editor of my second book, too).

>Q: Who do you get feedback from on your work/who do you trust to be truthful with you?

My writing group gives wonderful support and feedback. My mother has the ultimate say, though! She's my toughest, most honest, critic—and also my biggest fan. Because she's a book club junkie and an educator (K-8) and a children's book lover, her suggestions are definitely as insightful as my editor's suggestions.

>Q: What work are you most proud of? Or what work would you like to highlight?

Right now I'm most excited about *Red Glass*, which is coming out this September. I started the book around 2001, inspired by my experiences with immigrants in Tucson near the Mexican border as well as the years I spent with families of immigrants in Oaxaca, Mexico. This book is especially timely in light of the current immigration debate; I hope it gives readers some new empathetic perspectives. Most of all, I hope it helps people develop an interest in the life stories of immigrants from various countries.

>Q: Who is the main character and in what ways do you find yourself or expect readers to relate to him/her?

Red Glass is narrated by teenage Sophie, who begins the book wracked with insecurities and anxieties. During an impulsive road trip into southern Mexico and Guatemala with an unusual bunch of companions, she learns to open up to adventure and love.

I lived in Oaxaca, Mexico for two years, and have spent a lot of time traveling around Latin America. I've found that my experiences there have helped me get over my fears and given me refreshing new perspectives on life, which is similar to Sophie's story.

>Q: Where did the idea come from?

Red Glass was inspired by over ten years of friendships with ESL students, immigrants, and refugees who shared their stories with me and showed me how a person can live a meaningful, joyful life despite past traumas and losses. I love the human connections that form between people of vastly different cultures and backgrounds—not only bonds people have formed with me, but bonds my immigrant friends form with each other.

>Q: How long does it take you to complete something?

That's hard to say, since I often put drafts of stories away for many months at a time to let the story simmer in my unconscious. And I rarely write without getting up every twenty minutes or so to make a cup of tea or to water some plants. For *What the Moon Saw*, I began thinking about the book around 1997, but I didn't start really writing it until about 2000. I kept tinkering around with it until 2005, when I handed the final revision to my editor. For my second novel, *Red Glass*, I began thinking about it around 2000, began writing around 2001, and kept tinkering with it until 2006.

Now that I'm actually making money with writing, I've quit a couple part-time jobs; currently, I only teach two days a week, and spend the rest of the time (in theory) writing. So... I'm really hoping that my next books take less than five years a piece!

>Q: What is the worst thing you've ever written? What did you learn from it?

I don't know about the absolute worst thing—but my first effort at a novel was in college, in the early-mid nineties. It was a young adult novel called *The Dragon Book* (and this was

before dragons became all the rage!) The first draft was about 50 pages—yet I felt it was a completed novel. My mom read it and said encouragingly, “This feels like the *beginning* of a great book.” But I’d run out of steam by that point.

What did I learn from it? Well, it made me understand what an incredibly enormous amount of work it would be to write an entire novel with a beginning, middle, and end!

>Q: Who most inspires you?

People I meet while traveling in other countries and while exploring the nooks and crannies of my own country. I love spending time with locals, talking with them about their lives, hearing their stories, participating in their daily lives. Most of the characters in my books are inspired by friends I’ve made on my travels... around the world and in my own neighborhood.

>Q: What tips would you give in finding a publisher or agent?

Join SCBWI. Go to conferences. Make friends with other writers, both published and yet-unpublished. Join a writing group to make your writing the best it can be before you submit it to an agent/editor. Keep your eyes out for what kinds of manuscripts different editors/agents are looking for. Send submissions out to specially selected agents/editors with letters tailored to their particular interests. Don’t feel discouraged if you get some rejections. Celebrate small victories!

>Q: What is the biggest struggle you have faced in your work? What did it take to get through that?

For me the biggest struggle is dealing with insecurities and anxieties surrounding writing. The specific nature of the anxiety has changed over the years, depending on what stage I’m at. For example, in the past the insecurities have been: What if this manuscript never gets published—have I wasted my time? What if I can’t do the revisions my editor wants? What if I can never create another good book? And on and on and on...

By now, I understand that I can’t escape these insecurities—I can only put them into perspective and choose not to pay too much attention to them. I conceive of them as a pesky, shape-shifting monster that’s always trying to undermine my creativity. Now I can recognize the monster in his disguise and say, “Oh, it’s you again,” then do my best to ignore him, and keep writing.