

Questions and Answers:

I belong to a writers group online at BookRix, called "Serious Writers". Since I'm a published author, I was asked by the group moderator if I would be the group's 'resident expert', per se, and answer questions from aspiring writers within the group.

After doing this for a couple of days, I thought there might be others who have a few of the same questions.

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dear cj,

before you published your first book, did you ever come close to throwing in the towel and giving up? what kept you going?

marc

Hello, Marc,

No, I never even considered giving up. If anything, when I got discouraged by the rejections, I doubled my efforts, because I wanted it so bad I could taste it! I gave up a full time job to try and get my book published. I decided if I didn't get a contract by the end of six months, I would go back to work and consider my writing "a nice little hobby".

Well, it's a good thing it worked out, because I know now, after having four books published, and with another five children's books in the hands of a wonderful illustrator I found online -- I never in a million years could have pushed the writing aside -- it isn't a *hobby*. Writing is as much a part of me as my eyes, or my hands are.

Remember, it only takes one "yes" to be published ... be persistent, be dedicated, and above all else, believe in yourself and your work.

CJ

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CJ

Does it sometimes happen, when you write for children, to get 'carried away' into something that is too complicated and then you have to simplify? In other words,

how do you know what a child aged x years old will understand?
marc.

Hi Marc,
As to how, and if, something works, and if it can be understood by children at certain ages, I guess I cheat ... well, actually, I prefer to call it "get a leg up".

When I write something for children, whether it's a poem or a story, I try it out first on one or more of my grandchildren in that age group -- I have nine grandchildren, boys and girls, and ranging in age from two up to fourteen. They're my best (and most painfully honest) critics. When it works, it works. When it doesn't, I get the audible "raspberries" and, after finding out why it was ditzed, I head back to the drawing board to lick my wounds, re-write, and then re-read to them for another opinion.

If it passes the test with my grandchildren, I often take it along on an author school visit. During each of my presentations, I ask the children and teachers if they would like to hear a new story or poem.

Children know what's funny, what's scary, what will make them cry, or mom and dad angry. Ask your children, or grandchildren, go to a library or a playground and find a group of little ones to read to. Go to the source ...

Thank you!
CJ

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hey cj,
congrats on being a published author. Just a couple of questions. How do you first plan a story? Develop your characters or plot? And how do you create that perfect 'voice' of the narrator?
thank you for your time :)
Milly

Hi CJ!
I would like to write stories/books for the 12-17 age group. Currently I'm writing a fantasy. I've been writing it for about 7 years now.

My question to you is, I know generally what I want to happen in my story but I can't seem to fill in the blanks! Has this ever happened to you? If so, what did you do to get around it or fix it?

Mer-

Great Questions, Ladies,

Milly, I first plan a story probably like you and everyone else does -- somehow, an idea just comes, and when it does, I run with it. I like to call it "being spiritually inspired". I have a strong belief in the universe. I believe everything happens for a reason -- and it happens exactly when it's supposed to. There's a reason the idea for a story came to you -- it's almost like there's a purpose for writing it.

I think we've all had an "inspiration"; you know, where a story or poem almost writes itself. When the inspiration comes, it's all we can think of and the words flow effortlessly from our hearts to our minds and fingers.

I can give you a couple of my own examples. A few years ago, I was driving to visit my youngest daughter in North Carolina from my home in New Hampshire. On the drive, I couldn't stop thinking about some possible children's poems that were banging around in my head, wanting to come out and be written. When I stopped at a traffic light I scribbled lines in a notebook. I scribbled lines in a restaurant while I had lunch, when I stopped to use a public restroom. By the time I arrived at my daughter's, sixteen hours later, I had written six poems and half of another two. I was ... "being inspired". As writers, you all know what I'm talking about because you've experienced it.

I've also had it happen the other way, where I couldn't write anything, no matter how hard I tried. I've learned to just let it go when that happens -- set it aside or put it in a drawer. When the inspiration isn't there, wait until you sense and feel the inspiration again.

I have one poem about my first husband's military funeral, called "Taps for my Soldier", which took 31 years to write. It was there inside me and wanting to come out, but it was too close to my heart and soul and I couldn't see past the grief to write about it in more than a line at a time. With the passage of time, it began to flow, but only when the universe was ready for it. The complete poem now lies in

the Arlington National Cemetery as part of the "Taps Project" by invitation.

I guess my answer to you about "filling in the missing blanks" of a story would be, just wait it out. Put the story in a drawer and come back to it later. When it's time, the story will almost finish itself through inspiration. Even characters will seem to write themselves -- they will literally come alive when you write their character and tell you what they will say or how they will act in the story.

As to the 'voice' of a story. Try it many ways, Milly. There will be one way that "speaks" to you in a louder voice -- again, that inspiring voice. When I'm writing a story, especially if it has some truth to it from a personal memory or experience, writing it in first person sometimes feels better, more right, than writing it from an imaginary character's POV.

I think what I'm saying throughout this whole diatribe is this ... trust in yourself. Trust in the universe, and in being inspired. All things happen exactly when they're supposed to. With the universe, nothing is ever wasted.

Thank you!

CJ

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Hi, CJ,

I love all your short stories! What aspect do you think is the most difficult part of getting published?

Meli

Hi Melissa,

Thank you for your kind comment. I don't think there's anything easy about getting published -- or self-publishing -- but if I had to choose the most difficult aspect, at least for me, it would have to be the infernal editing you have to do.

As writers, we have a tendency to think every word in a story or poem is necessary to the story. Wrong-wrong-wrong. Our readers are smarter than we think. When we can say something in twelve words, why take one hundred?

Edit, edit, edit. Read it again. Edit. Then have someone else read your story. Listen

to their comments and edit some more. My partner, Robert, and I edit each other's work. I think the one word we overuse the most is "that" (laughing). I think in one short story of 1120 words, we cut 47 "that's"!

A Quick Example:

"I think that the most difficult thing that a writer has to think about is the fact that we have to tell a story in shorter words, by using meaty sentences that allow our readers to use their imaginations to understand everything that is being said by us."

After Editing:

"I think the most difficult thing for a writer to do is write concisely, giving readers the freedom to feel and imagine."

So, I guess my answer to your question is -- "Editing".

Thank you, Melissa!

CJ